

interzone

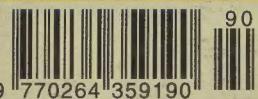
JULY/AUGUST 2003

NUMBER 190

£3.50

New stories by
Sarah Ash
Eric Brown
Daniel Kaysen
John Meaney
Nick Waller

*plus an
interview
with*
**Chris
Wooding**



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Graphic Design
and Typesetting
Paul Brazier

Advisory Editors
John Clute
Malcolm Edwards
Judith Hanna
Lee Montgomerie
Simon Ounsley

Subscriptions Secretary
Ann Pringle

Interzone
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United Kingdom.

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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JULY/AUGUST 2003

Number 190

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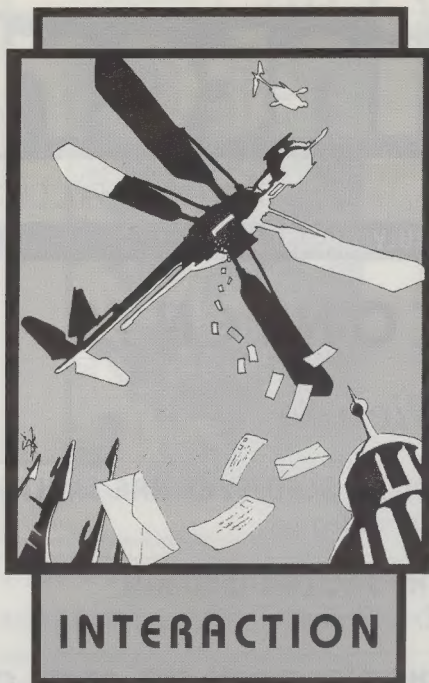
Who Didn't Kill Horror?

Dear Editors:

Oh no, it's the death of horror again! (I refer to Gary Westfahl's piece "Who Didn't Kill Horror?" in *Interzone* 188.) It has frequently been announced. Surely the truth is that the field has reverted to one of its natural states. When I discovered it in the 1950s, very little new was being published, and often wasn't published as horror. The living bestseller was the wretched Dennis Wheatley, and Lovecraft was hardly in print. The previous decades had been far more productive, but much of what appeared was rubbish. Haven't we just been somewhere much like that? As for who didn't kill horror, certainly no good writer did or can, and quite a few are still working. I'm too busy trying to be one myself to attend to spurious post-mortems.

Ramsey Campbell

Wallasey, Merseyside



Dear Editors:

I'd like to respond to Gary Westfahl's article "Who Didn't Kill Horror?" (*IZ* 188, April 2003) which, it seems to me, begins from the flawed premise that there was ever a "robust, expanding category of literature" to be killed.

The idea that "horror" could be defined, packaged and marketed to a large audience as a genre of fiction, like mystery or historical romance, was such a shaky premise that it's surprising only that it was successful for as long as it was. Horror is not a genre; it is an emotion. (This idea is not unique to me; unfortunately, I can't remember who first expressed it

that way in print – Dennis Etchison? Douglas Winter? David Hartwell?) It is hard to codify and package an emotion into a fictional format so that it delivers the same, reliable punch to many readers. It isn't hard to break down the formula for a romance or a mystery, but much more difficult to explain how horror could actually work as a genre distinct from others.

In addition, supernatural horror has always been a minority taste. There did seem to be a change in the public mood in the 1980s, a hunger for supernatural thrills which brought ghosts, monsters and demon into the mainstream, but that changed, as styles do, with the next decade. Interest in the supernatural is still around, acceptable and pervasive as it never was in the '60s, for example, but the contemporary emphasis seems less on the aspect of horror, more on fantasies of power and escape.

Horror today is strongly represented in popular fiction as in all the mass media, in fantasy, sf, crime, thrillers and even mainstream literature. It's alive. So I think Gary Westfahl's imaginary detective might have to conclude that although undoubtedly crimes were committed, murder was not one of them.

Lisa Tuttle

Argyll, Scotland

Dear Editors:

Back in 1990 I bought a short-story anthology called *Dark Fantasies*, edited by Chris Morgan. In his introduction Chris points out how at the time some horror writers were "vying with each other" to up the gross-out factor. Well, obviously that was a dead-end street. This collection was

an attempt to push horror into a more subtle direction, but one rooted in everyday experience. The book defined the type of stories I wanted to read and contained the authors I liked: Brian Stableford, Stephen Gallagher, Lisa Tuttle, Ramsey Campbell, etc. These writers could take horror in a way that it could develop, but you don't need F. R. Leavis to point out that they are unlikely to have the mass-market appeal of the gross-outs. With the "horror" label, they will never get the serious consideration they deserve either – which is why Chris Morgan suggested the alternative label of Dark Fantasy. A noble failure and, frankly, with all due respect to Gary Westfahl... no great mystery either!

Steve Tollyfield

stephen.tollyfield@talk21.com

SF Novellas

Dear Editors:

I'd like to comment on Bruce Gillespie's enjoyable essay about sf novellas (*Interzone* 187). I've lately been reading some sf magazines from the late 1940s through the '50s, and I can report some details about how they labelled different lengths of stories. It certainly varied widely from magazine to magazine. *Astounding*, Gillespie notes (quoting John Boston), labelled stories that were complete in one issue "novels." Actually, the label I've seen is "short novel." They seemed generally to call stories of over 20,000 words "short novels," and stories of over 10,000 words "novelettes." As far as I know, *Astounding*/*Analog* continued to use the term "Short Novel," as opposed to novella, throughout the John W. Campbell era, all the way into the '70s. The same seems true for *F&SF*: the earliest use of novella I can find for that magazine dates to 1973, with "Short Novel" being used at least until 1971. *Galaxy*, however, as Gillespie notes, was using novella from the early '50s.

In the "pulp" of the day things were a bit different. The sister publications *Startling Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* were quite thick. They did indeed usually feature one "Complete Novel" per issue – but very often said "Complete Novel" really was of novel-length, at least according to the Nebula/Hugo definitions. I've seen stories of up to 60,000 words in single issues of those magazines. They could also be as short as around 30,000 words. (Shorter stories, in the 25,000 word range, were called "Short Novels" as distinguished from "Complete Novels.") Novels such as Leigh Brackett's *The Sword of Rhiannon* and *The Big Jump*, Theodore Sturgeon's *The*

Announcement

Once more this issue of *Interzone* is dated for two months – "July-August 2003." We apologize for the confusion this may cause, but as on previous occasions when we have double-dated an issue, it does not mean that the magazine has moved to a bimonthly schedule, and nor does it mean that we have skipped an issue. The issue numbering remains continuous (so no one loses out), and the intention is that the magazine should remain monthly. All subscriptions are per six or twelve issues and take no account of cover dates. We've found it necessary, because of slippage in our schedule, to re-date the magazine so that it covers two calendar months this time around – but, all being well, the next *Interzone*, number 191, will be the September 2003 issue.

Dreaming Jewels, and Jack Vance's *Slaves of the Klau* all appeared, complete as far as I can tell, in single issues of pulps such as those mentioned above, as well as *Space Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*.

By contrast, some of the thinner, and probably lower-paying, pulps had rather more elastic definitions of "Complete Novel." *Planet Stories* used to trumpet one or two stories an issue as "A Thrilling Novel of Space Adventure," "A Gripping Novel of Barbarian Worlds," or some such similar thing. These "novels" seemed to start at around 15,000 words. Even more striking is the example of the March 1951 issue of *Future Combined With Science Fiction Stories*, which features two "Complete Novels": Poul Anderson's "Incomplete Superman" and Margaret St. Clair's "Age of Prophecy." Each is about 10,000 words.

Going forward in time to my teenage years, I remember having a hard time figuring out what really was a novelette. *Galaxy*, under Jim Baen, seemed to use a borderline of 16 pages, which might be less than 15 pages, or about 6,000 words, when you consider illustrations. *F&SF* and *Analog* seemed more consistently to hold to the "official" definitions, for what they are worth. It's my impression that the lower-end magazines, such as the pulps of the early '50s, or financially-troubled *Galaxy* in the mid-'70s, seemed to find it necessary to give the impression of offering "more bang for the buck." Surely a "Complete Novel" is longer than a lowly novella or novelette? And a 6,000-word novelette might look longer than a 7,000-word short story, if labelled that way.

The confusion even spreads to SFWA's anthologies, *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame* series. Volume I is supposed to be the best sf stories of all time, and volume II the best novellas. And indeed the longest stories in Volume I are under 17,000 words ("The Weapons Shop" by A. E. Van Vogt, at perhaps 16,500, is the longest). However, Volume II includes a couple of stories in the 14,000-word range, and one story, Cordwainer Smith's "The Ballad of Lost C'Mell," that is less than 9,000 words long. (Smith's own "Scanners Live in Vain," at some 15,000 words, is included in Volume I.)

I suppose what all this really means is that strict length definitions are arbitrary, even a bit silly. I suppose I tend to like the old *Astounding* rules: under 10,000 is a short story, to 20,000 is a novelette, and 20,000 to perhaps 50,000 is a short novel or novella.

I'm a bit surprised that Gillespie didn't mention that the novellas he cites, edited by Peter Crowther, all originally appeared in thin stand-alone editions from PS Publishing. That form of pub-

lishing may be the real wellspring of new novellas. Stand-alone "short novels" in the 30,000-word range are reasonably common in the mainstream (for example, Don De Lillo's *The Body Artist* and Muriel Spark's *Aiding and Abetting* are both under 40,000 words) – why not have more books of such length in the sf field?

At any rate, I enjoyed Bruce Gillespie's article, and I am certainly one who is happy to see novellas in any form in sf (including the occasional *Interzone* two-part serial).

Rich Horton

richard.horton@sff.net

Bruce Gillespie replies: *Any and all information in this field is welcome, because I don't have copies of the magazines before 1961. After that date, the real villain when fudging the lengths of stories was Frederik Pohl in (at one stage) the four magazines he was editing. I'll have to look through old copies of If, but I'm pretty sure I remember short pieces (only about 25 pages long) being called "Complete Novels in this Issue."*

It's a pity my late friend John Foyster was not up to sending his own letter of comment by the time the article appeared; in the old days he would have sent you an entire essay to put me right, quoting chapter and verse back to 1941. John was always a great admirer of Startling Stories, and other magazines edited by Sam Merwin. I don't have the magazines to check on their quality, but Mr Horton perhaps gives a clue as to why those magazines gave good value for money: they actually did run complete novels in an issue.

As for the lack of credit I gave to Peter Crowther's venture, PS Publishing, I wish to apologize for that – but at the same time I do wonder why there is still no credit to PS Publishing in Cities, the latest volume of four novellas edited by Crowther and published by Gollancz. We don't see any books from PS Publishing here in Australia, which is why I didn't know about the origins of the novellas project.

Dear Editors:

Some quick thoughts on *Interzone* 187:

"Sandtrap": A nice set-up, but by mid-way through I found the situation distressingly familiar; industrial cover-up of discovery of alien intelligence (how many times have I read this story?) and it's obviously going to be Gabi who's behind it all. It was nice to be proved wrong on the last point, so thanks to Nicholas Waller for providing a neat twist on this idea.

"Disorder in the Head": I must admit I haven't enjoyed Zoran Zivkovic's latest sequence of tales as much as his previous work, but this story wrapped things up in a delightful fashion. Great stuff.

"God in the Box": An enjoyable tale from Nick Wood, though I'm not sure if this plot fully did justice to the central idea.

"Dawn in the Garden of England": Another good tale from a new writer, Gary Budgen. I particularly liked the vivid imagery of the creatures' emergence at the end of the story.

"Heavy Ice": I didn't find the central murder mystery too engaging, but the quality of Dominic Green's writing is always high. Worth reading just for the joke about the woman using time-dilation to inherit her son's inheritance!

Lawrence Conquest
Bristol

Dear Editors:

Please accept my votes for the best (highest first) *Interzone* stories of 2002:

"The Whisper of Discs," John Meaney (#183)

"Time Spent in Reconnaissance," Mat Coward (#181)

"The Comeback Season," Daniel Kaysen (#184)

"To Become a Warrior," Chris Beckett (#180)

"The Turing Test," Chris Beckett (#183)

"Posterity," Christopher Evans (#182)

"Eaters of the Heart," Peter T. Garratt (#183)

"Teaching the War Robot to Dance," Tony Ballantyne (#178)

"Blue Water, Grey Death," Dominic Green (#175)

"Little Green Card," Mat Coward (#183)

I would like to add a few remarks concerning editorial policy. Over the last few years (I have been a subscriber since 1995) I have noticed a few "short stories" that have been little more than opening chapter of a "soon to be published" novel. As publishers of short fiction I feel that you should concentrate on short fiction (a genre which is rapidly losing its outlets). Stand-alone shorts based around established characters (Greg Mandel, etc) are fine as long as they meet the same editorial standard as any other contribution. Likewise serials – "Back in the USSA," "Lord Soho," etc. I feel that it is wrong to deprive a new writer a chance to be published in order to provide a big name with an advertisement. Publish an encouraging review or a favourable review by all means, but leave the short-fiction pages for those who aspire to shine in that (shrinking) genre.

Long live the short story!

Jim Falconer
West Lothian

Letters for publication should be e-mailed to *interzone@cix.co.uk* – or sent by conventional post to our editorial address (shown on the contents page). Please note that we reserve the right to shorten letters.

Entangled Eyes are Smiling

John Meaney

"My love function" – I raised my voice: uilleann pipes were making *Ode to the Irish* into a dirge – "shows a sharp discontinuity."

Howard's idea of a joke: a smoky, darkened Irish tavern in downtown Chicago. Trying to cheer me up, without realizing the problem – not that Anya was gone, but that I didn't care.

I sucked in a deep nicotine hit, then laid aside my smouldering cigarette (which I've learned not to call a fag, thanks) to draw a wet beer-puddle graph with my fingertip. A jagged switch downslope: this morning's confrontation.

Squinting against bluish haze, Howard rubbed his reddish goatee – he looks more Irish than I do – then pushed away his Guinness. He nodded with seventh-pint wisdom.

"Anya really left you, huh?"

"Big time."

Kitchen scene: me buck-naked, stumbling in caffeine-tropic mode – a random walk algorithm across sticky floor-tiles. Anya is dressed: cargo pants, artfully slashed blouse, denim jacket. A Sony Vaio hangs off her shoulder.

ANYA: *You're a slob. Look at you.*

ME (looking down at pale skinny form): *My body fat is minuscule.*

ANYA: *Like other things I could mention.* (Laughs unpleasantly.)

ME (lighting up a fag, sorry, cigarette): *I'm working, sure.*

Staring into random nothingness is work, for a mathematician. Right?

ANYA: *Working solo, unless you shower... Solo forever, as far as I'm concerned.*

ME: *Huh?*

Door slams.

"Finally," breathed Howard, but I'd lost track of his meaning.

I stared at the floor, regretting my lack of regret. Not good.

Meanwhile, on the tiny stage, the faux-Irish band – guys who speak with a lilting brogue, when the closest they've been to the Oul' Country is snogging with their girlfriends at the end of Navy Pier – banged away on bodhráns, whistled on cheap flutes, exploring their roots.

Don't mind me. I wasn't at my best.

"You explained that you're rich?" Howard tapped the side of his nose meaningfully. "Anya knows that, right?"

"I... don't know." I'd always thought of stock options as virtual money.

In the background, the scruffy lead singer – my own appearance is irrelevant – was whining on about beating the devil, grabbing hold of the Dark One's tail. If your man worked out beyond wagging his plectrum, it didn't show. Like I should talk.

"If it doesn't come naturally, leave it." Howard enjoyed quoting old Al Stewart songs. "Or do you want Anya back?"

I shrugged.

"Well, then... You need a new girlfriend, right?"

"I don't know."

"Look... You're Artificial, and I'm Life."

"How the partnership works."

"So we'll see the alien in the morning, okay? And mine's another Guinness."

Back to his place, to make arrangements. The next reg-

ular hookup to New Mexico was a fortnight away; in our alcohol-fuelled urgency, we couldn't wait that long.

So we stumbled through the bright-lit night to the El station, hunting for the Brown Line: another nocturnal adventure. Staying within the Loop is safe; outside, some areas are great, others you don't venture into without a bodyguard. (Howard lives towards the North, off Wellington, which seems okay.)

There are two aspects of big American cities which confuse an Irish country boy: the poverty-driven violence, and the way badness is localized. In Dublin, you have to watch yourself north of the river; in London it's south of the Thames where trouble starts. Smeared-out probability clouds. Whole blocks in a boolean state. Discretely indiscreet crime. Or was that – ?

"Funny, ha-ha." Howard stood up in the swaying train, searching his pockets for keys.

Had I spoken aloud?

"Thing is," I told him, "there are no warning signs, like: You Are Now Entering a Bad Neighbourhood, You Poor Dumb Mick. You just gotta know."

"Huh," said Howard wisely.

The train slid to a halt at Diversey.

Doors hissed, opened wide.

Departing the El, we wandered on foot along busy streets: bright stores beneath dark night skies. Barnes & Noble glittered with invitation, a crystal cave of –

Howard's grip tightened on my sleeve.

"You don't have to go in every goddamn bookstore in the continental USA, Jack. I've never been bored around books, till I started hanging with you."

Howard is tall and wide-shouldered, and he lurched a little as he spoke. A woman stepped aside, wide-eyed, then walked on quickly. Howard remained oblivious.

"Try finding a bookshop open in Dublin at eleven p.m.," I said. "Or anywhere else in the world. This is a great country."

We held each other's sleeves for balance as we negotiated the five steps – or was it seven? a low prime, anyway – up to Howard's front door. Music drifted from inside.

"Anyway, they shut at eleven."

"You know what I mean."

Howard scraped the key around the lock in a successive-approximation algorithm. Eventually it slid in with a click, and the door opened.

The living-room was a chaotic jumble. Or possibly not: there are three classes of cellular-automata evolution-rules which produce random patterns; only one corresponds to chaos theory. Hey, it's maths, but PAY ATTENTION, 'cos we'll need to know this.

Anyway, chaos.

Discarded Domino's Pizza boxes littered the floor. Grease stains were spattered according to an indecipherable algorithm. A dozen hairy individuals of both sexes were sitting cross-legged before a widescreen TV, waving lit cigarette lighters from side to side, singing "*I will walk through the fire*" out of tune.

"It's a *Buffy: The Musical* party," said Howard.

I frowned. "How come you didn't invite us?" And, to Howard: "Strictly speaking, it's called *Once More With –*"

"Sit down, man." One of them, Pete, waved his Coors bottle towards a cushion.

"– touch the fire, and it –"

"Come on. Gotta get the hookup online."

"– want the fire back –"

"Howard, will you stop taking hold of my sleeve?"

Up in one corner of the ceiling, I saw a cluster of purple scuttlers (I had four of them at home myself, for housekeeping), frozen in place. Either their algorithms were fried, or Howard's housemates had been tormenting the poor constructs. Again.

"– by one, they turn from me –"

We slipped out of the room, stumbled upstairs to Howard's study. It's a big house. The housemates have two rooms each. If there were a second bathroom, the place would be perfect.

"All right." Howard tapped the spherical webcam atop the monitor. "Anybody there?"

He cleared away the distributed SETI search program, which was a joke: Howard's one of the select few who've met an alien in person. (I think he likes the search-graph's colours.) It's something of a non-secret secret, in the halls of academe. There are cellular-automata rules corresponding to classical diffusion; knowledge of xeno contact is spreading according to –

"Here we go."

Small window, jerky image. Purely human: a weary-looking face.

"Someone committed rhetoric over lunch." The man's voice sounded squeaky. (The speakers, either side of the monitor, have Mickey Mouse ears superglued atop.) "We estimate that catatonia will last another seven hours."

"What happened?"

"Someone asked 'Why – ?' and then choked on their sandwich. The Zajinet thought it was the whole question. It's frozen solid, as usual."

"Damn. They are so literal-minded. Um... Could I get a lab hookup tomorrow? Say, ten a.m.? With my colleague, Dr Mulvaney, sitting in."

Sounds of remote mouse-clicking came through the speakers. Spooky.

"That'll be Dr Jack Mulvaney? No problem. What are you going to talk about?"

"I thought we could get Jack's love life sorted out." Howard raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. That's okay" – the other man chuckled – "you don't need to tell me. You got the clearance."

"Would I lie to you?"

"See? Easy." Howard shut down the comms window, swivelled his chair to face me. "Want to crash here?"

From the stairwell, a raucous chorus: "– see you all in H-E-L-L –"

"Party's almost over." Howard scratched his red beard. "Unless they play it again."

"Reckon I'll go home."

Bad mistake.

I live south of the Loop, and that's where they mugged me.

Swift. Frightening.

Pinning me against a wall (cold and hard against my back), they demanded money. A blade pressed against my neck. My hand was shaking when I pulled out my wallet, and I fumbled. It slapped upon the ground.

I flinched.

"Clumsy bastard."

Something thudded warmly against the left side of my head. Darkness and orange flashes swirled.

Then I was sitting on the grimy sidewalk, while my attackers laughed, jogged and skipped away – one of them ran sideways: a kid in a schoolyard – then hooked into a side street. I don't even know how many of them there were. Me, the Number King, as my old Da used to –

Never mind.

My vision blurred, not from physical hurt. I pulled myself upright, then smacked the wall, hard, as though it were to blame.

I should have reported the theft, but I just wanted to go home.

That night, my dreams filled up with conflicting structures – curlicued, random patterns delineated in spectacular hues, where fractures and crevasses slid, multiplied – while all around me rang the laughter of contemptuous women. Shadows moiréed with hot reddened eyes, like vicious men intent upon their victims.

It pissed me off.

"Oh, God – Fred. How're ya?" Fred was not so much green as dull white in the morning light, dangling on the back of the door. "Any – ? Shit."

Events crowded in on me like "traffic light" cell structures in the Game of Life – they blink at you, fast and annoying, impossible to ignore.

Anya had left her skeleton; everything else was gone. An oversight.

"Sorry, Fred. You're on the bone-heap."

Two purple scuttlers were tracking across the ceiling, their work almost done. Everything was clean; books and CDs stood in square-edged stacks on my desk.

Groaning, I rolled out of bed, and padded over to the door. My fingernails clacked down Fred's glow-in-the-dark ribs.

"Hang on in there, pal."

I went downstairs.

I sat hunched over a cracked formica table which would've been stylish when my parents were in nappies. (I nearly said diapers; last week I described a can as aluminum. Jaysus save me from corrupt English.) I had a sudden vivid memory of my grandfather, picking up my red-and-blue tricycle after the milkman's float had run over it and twisted it to pretzel-hood.

"This'll be banjaxed then, old son." Granda resumed sucking on his unlit pipe.

Story of my life, Granda.

Breakfast was my usual black coffee and a fa – sorry, cigarette. The hot coffee washed away some of the fungal fuzz, but if I smiled (no chance) my teeth would glow

green as Fred at midnight. Should've brushed.

Somewhere, I had a scrap of paper with a number on it: the place to ring if my credit cards and wallet were lost, or ripped off by primordial subhumans. Somewhere... In my wallet?

"Janey mac, Granda. Now what do I do?"

A second coffee energized me enough to crawl upstairs, flip open my battered Thinkpad, boot the thing up. There was a file with personal admin stuff – did you think I was stupid? – and I whipped up Explorer, found it straight away.

"Thank God for that." Double-click, window opening. "I thought I was totally –"

I'm password-protected, dumbass. A dialogue box confronted me. *Enter the magic word.*

Password... Something important like that, I'd have written down and kept on my person, close to hand. Maybe in my –

"Jesus H. Christ."

"Looks like John Cusack" – Howard waved a hand in my direction – "with a massive hangover, wouldn't you say?"

The lens stared like a wide, psychotic eye. I felt like punching the thing.

"Please stand still before the scan."

"Sod off." The flash exploded inside my migraine like tangerine sheet lightning, webbed with black: my retina seeing itself. Too early in the morning for recursive metaphysics. "For God's sake –"

"See?" Howard raised his hands to the security scanner. "You should've taken my word for it."

"Please proceed inside."

The lab door clicked open.

Blue scuttlers milled around our feet, tagging along as we passed through the outer labs. The wee blue fellers, part of Howard's and my collaborative effort, are more curious – dare I say, more intelligent? – than their workaday purple counterparts.

They're grown the same way, more or less, from budding cells which replicate and change state according to the condition of their neighbours. It's the unholy mating-ground where cell biology and software merge: cellular automata, instantiated in morphoplastic.

And the little blue guys' algorithms differ by only a smidgin from the purple domestic models: about as much as our DNA differentiates us from Bobo the Chimp.

"You know the definition of Artificial Intelligence?" Howard tapped the alpha entry code – CTAATGT, the base-inverse of GATTACA, big joke – for the inner door.

"A blonde who dyes her hair dark." I rubbed my face hard. "The Artificial Humour add-on goes to beta release any year now."

"Hmm." Howard scowled. I wasn't supposed to remember jokes he'd told two dozen times before. "After you, squire."

Convincing Irish idiom. Right.

Inside, the room was gloomy. Then the rear wall flickered into life: an array of overlapping flatscreens, with flex-capability and polarized-parallax projection. It's the

nearest thing to lifesize moving holograms, and if holos ever become available then Howard's lab will be the first to wangle a grant.

"Here we are."

The alien's image reared up.

So this is what a Zajinet looks like: a clumped outer form of roundish lumps like sandstone boulders, and smaller bumps within the interstices, down to the size of pebbles. Inside them, whirl tiny grains like sand.

If you've ever watched *Galaxy Quest* through a haze of vodka and lime, you might think of the big rock monster. (Howard couldn't see the resemblance. But he was on gin slings with black vodka chasers.)

It doesn't matter much, either way. For after those brief seconds when you spot a Zajinet laying aside its everyday form, all you'll remember is that blazing core being: a fiery, brilliant tracery of burning light which bears no resemblance to anything you might have seen or dreamt of.

"This is Jack." Howard knew better than to confuse the alien with pointless greeting-rituals. "He has problems communicating with potential human mating partners –"

"Steady on, old mate." I rubbed my ear where one of the muggers had left his mark last night. It was hot, beginning to throb.

"– and I need to know, can the Three Sisters sort him out with an implant?"

Howard looked perfectly serious.

An implant?

Something rose inside me. Was I going to be sick?

Then: *Which three sisters is he talking about?*

At that moment, I had a sudden, deep feeling that Howard's work – his solo work – had extended into areas I had never suspected. It quelled my nascent vomiting.

Whichever three sisters he was referring to, it was not a metaphor. The Zajinets are completely literal-minded... in a parallel-processing, quantum-computational, fuzzy-logic kind of way.

<<is connect: the human's hatred>>

<<is the dark enforces overlay>>

<<is love engage/depart>>

<<is hate the resonance divine>>

Then white/orange knots of curlicued light were floating in the foreground: a visual shorthand for automata-rules. The state of a cell depended not just on its adjoining cells, but on its neighbours, and its neighbours' neighbours.

Sounds simple, but such rules can produce structures of astounding complexity.

So what? No one's trying to program me... Are they?

"My thanks." Howard bowed to the alien. "That's –"

The Zajinet disappeared.

It was the last I ever saw of our alien visitor. But the information it had transmitted remained, glowing softly like abstract electronic art.

"It made up its minds very quickly." Howard pulled shreds of tissue from his pocket, kneaded them together, blew his nose into the clump. Then he lobbed the wet

remnants into a trash can. "Even for a Zajinet."

"And that's a good sign?"

Howard shrugged, wiped his hands on his shirt.

"Beats me."

"Artificial Sentient Systems?" I asked him as we neared the corridor's end. "Did you choose the acronym first, or was that just a happy accident?"

"Wait till you see."

"And there are three of them, right?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Here's how the Game of Life and other simple networks do their stuff. Think of a grid, an array of cells like chess-board squares, except they can switch colour. Maybe one square starts off black, and the rest are white.

Now apply a rule to every square instantaneously: it becomes black if exactly three of its eight neighbours – I'm including the diagonals – are black. If two neighbours (but not three or more) are black, the cell remains unchanged, regardless of its colour; otherwise it becomes white. On the next clock tick, apply the same rule again. Then again.

Simple enough?

So, try changing the starting configuration: not just one black square, but the pattern of your choice. Now you obtain moving forests – sometimes – of complexity. You even find structures acting as Turing machines, computers in their own right. The little virtual worlds with simple deterministic rules grow as complex as entire universes.

At the very least, it's a way of building mathematical models with not an equation in sight. That notion alone makes some professors mad enough to spit.

You can play the game other ways. Different rules for changing colour. A spectrum of possible colours. Or, not a global clock-tick, but just one cell changing at a time. Or many-dimensional grids, or non-rectilinear networks.

Some patterns are simple, some aren't. Take a snapshot at an arbitrary point in time: the image might look an awful lot like a slice through muscle tissue, or particle-tracks through a cloud chamber. One particular output is a fuzzy grey mist (at large scale), with a tiny knot of confusion down in the lower left hand corner... Howard keeps a hardcopy pinned up in his lab, entitled *Dan Quayle's Brain*. Seems a little harsh.

In my own office, the most colourful poster has so far escaped the predations of the Thought Police. On it, a huge square-jawed, pillow-breasted woman – with massive forearms, more than a hint of moustache above lips caked with cherry lipstick – scowls at the camera. She's leaning against a muddy tractor, wearing a tight-laced black rubber basque, fishnet stockings. In one hand, a coiled bullwhip; in the other, a bottle of vodka.

I thought a strange attractor was pure maths, reads the caption, until I discovered Smirnoff.

Amazing what you can do with Photoshop and a few idle moments.

I'd have to argue that the poster is relevant to my work. (I'm not saying I'd *win* the argument.) Cellular automata with simple rules – here I follow the Wolfram categorization – produce randomness and complexity in three different ways, which really is strange.

One way comes from fluctuating input; the second category varies wildly with tiny changes to the starting-pattern, *à la* chaos theory: butterfly wings, tempests, like that.

But the third, that's the feller. Robust, simple rules, which can stand up to perturbation. If a chaotic system is a giggling neurotic schoolgirl likely to fall apart at the slightest remark, then this new type is bluff, hearty, salt-of-the-earth dependable – producing random structured patterns till the cows come home.

You can't write an equation for such a process. But, like Wolfram, I'm convinced that this kind of localized evolution drives the universe.

Bejusus, we've cracked it! Free to you, sir or madam, no extra charge, the Theory of Everything, no superstrings attached, watch very carefully, at no time do the fingers leave the hand...

Sounds too good to be true? Simple program-rules instead of complicated formulas... There has to be a catch.

Here it is: in terms of the work I do, science works *backwards*.

I start with the evolution-rules. But, to analyze the universe, we begin with the complexity, the world around us, then try to deduce the simple rules which produced it. That would mean working through an infinity – don't get me started on which type of infinity – of simulations, to see which one produces our reality.

There's no magic shortcut to analyzing complexity. Can't be done. At least, not by human beings: we just don't think that way.

Apparently, the Zajinets do.

And now Howard was going to implant me with some kind of artificial sentience module – if I understood correctly, through my hammering hangover – which would co-exist inside my body without harming it, according to an adaptation rule given to him by an alien which had spent an entire half-second considering the alternatives.

Here's a reassuring thought: I was about to have my love life sorted out by an entity which responded to a question like "How are you?" by turning into a cataleptic heap of rocks.

"Howard?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"You know how many drinks you owe me for this?"

"More than either of us can possibly imagine?"

"Right. And I can imagine some very big numbers."

"Mm."

"So where are these sisters?"

But even before the final door opened, I could hear them.

"Come hate..."

"I don't like this, Howard."

"What do you mean?"

Their words caressed and slithered in my brain.

"Come love..."

"You programmed the voices to sound that way, right?"

"I don't –"

And, I admit it: they were compelling. Despite my misgivings, I knew without doubt that I was going to enter that lab.

"Jack? You really hear them?"

"Come strength..."

Writhing shadows drew me forwards, into their presence.

I knelt before them. Yes, Father: worshipping false idols. I admit it, all right? They grew larger, the Three Sisters, or seemed to: solidifying, grey-blue strips writhing inside a huge, membrane-walled tank. In liquid darkness they floated, complex and restless. Behind me, Howard's voice faded.

They were strange, and they were fascinating.

I should have been terrified – I was, kind of – yet I knelt awestruck, unmoving, staring into the dark fluid which bore and nourished them. A mess of strips, an abstract configuration like tide-washed, submerged seaweed. Sometimes they appeared to be three; in the next second, sinews and glial belts would weave themselves into a loose, single clump twice the size of a man.

"– helped me, the Zajinet –" Howard was explaining.

But then I heard their words, singing directly in my brain.

"You need to love?"

"Um –"

I nearly said yes. Whatever I had expected a new sentient species to say to me, a proposition worthy of Dublin's Leeson Street was certainly not it.

Love... Maybe what I needed was for Anya to suffer. How dare she leave me?

"You need to hate?"

My ear throbbed, my jaw ached... Hatred, yes. Anya was irrelevant. Hatred was what I needed, to survive in this concrete jungle once called the City of the Big Shoulders.

In his muscular poetry, Carl Sandburg also termed Chicago the "tall bold slugger." Around my neighbourhood, you're either the slugger or the slugged. A fork in the road...

"I choose the hatred."

Another bad move, in a very strange day.

I leaned forward, closer to the membrane, the dark fluid beyond. White-and-orange bursts of light surrounded me: Howard, delineating process-rules for the implanted cells to thrive inside me –

Implants! Was I insane?

But the squishy complexity known as Dr Jack Mulvaney was ripe for this: obsessed mathematician, social loser... Imagine a topology of emotion. Then this is me: a twisted, tangled knot of desperate unhappiness.

I leaned my forehead against the membrane. It was soft, and it was cool.

"The strength..."

And it was permeable.

Fluid surrounded my head, pressed against eyes and ears, cold as a bastard. I forced head and shoulders into

the viscous medium where the three – the one? – lived. The membrane formed a fluid-tight seal around me.

"The hatred..."

How long was my head inside the tank? Unknown... But finally I had to breathe. A gout of bubbles burst from my mouth – one great silver bubble wobbling upwards before me – but I clenched my teeth, hard, holding back the inevitable inhalation.

A single human-looking eye regarded me, from inside the tangled mass.

Ripples of blue.

I fell inwards, though surely just in my imagination, into glowing arcs and blazing nodes: a fiery subquantum net, the weave of spacetime itself. It glows, it shines a sapphire blue, that world-stuff...

And then my resolve broke and I sucked in, desperate for air. Hard fluid forced its way into my lungs, prised apart bronchioles: a cold, solid violation.

Madness! I should have fought whatever influence brought me to this place.

A single eye...

But there is no escape from the Three Sisters' will.

That first night, I had the strangest dream. After I stumbled from the lab, unable even to speak to Howard (mouth opening and closing like a landed mackerel; my mind at about the same level as our fishy ancestors), I made my way home. Somehow. I remember only the rage: at myself, for ever falling in with Howard's insane scheme.

Then I slept.

Sisyphus, I decided inside the nightmare, *I am become thee*.

Like the poor – but, let's face it, immensely strong – individual condemned to roll a heavy boulder up a long, steep slope in Hades, over and over for all eternity... So too, did I lift my heavy burden – heavy, man! yet I managed it – impossibly in the darkness, again and again, in the cycle of my punishment.

It gets worse.

When I awoke the next dawn, I was standing in the basement gloom. The basement! A thin column of smoky grey light filtered downwards, from a small ripped hole in the ceiling. I was covered in slick sweat, though not breathing hard. My arms and chest felt hard, my legs and back were strong, despite the invisible dust and grit which filled my eyes. Not to mention the wobbly nausea. Such a strange sleepwalking dream –

Scuffed tracks formed a path through the dust.

Now, you have to know the basement was disused. Since I moved into the first-floor apartment – since long before that – no one came down here. I'd taken the occasional peek from the doorway, was all.

Debris was piled against the walls. The floor should have been a smooth, even blanket of pale grey dust. Instead, a clear dark track diagonally crossed the basement.

In the near corner, this end of the dustless path, stood a big, rust-stained refrigerator. A clunky old fridge-freezer, which had been abandoned down here years ago.

Except... Hadn't it stood in the opposite corner? At the other end of this scuffed path through the dust?

A dream.

There was no other explanation.

It must have been a dream.

Still, I closed my eyes and took a few paces forward, arms outstretched as though for embrace, wondering... I clasped the massive thing, and it was hard, even heavier than I had imagined. Something metallic clunked inside.

Damn! It is heavy!

Yet still I lifted it.

I lugged it back and forth twice more, then replaced the huge freezer in its original corner. When I stepped back, its door swung open like a leer, revealing the big rusted components – lawnmower parts, another refrigerator motor – which lay inside.

Sweet Jesus.

Backing away, frightened now.

What have they done to me?

My bedroom mirror was speckled with dull spots, as though suffering from a fungal infection. My reflection was cloudy... but I could see the changes. Seams strained around my shoulders; my buttons were ready to pop. I was definitely bulkier.

What's happening?

I remembered a cold wet tongue slithering into my mouth, and shivered. Had I really received a pseudo-organic implant? Or was it hallucination?

Strength. Hatred. I'd begged for the latter. Or did the two go together?

I'd rejected love. I remembered that much.

You're crazy.

A rational question, then. How could I have increased mass without eating?

No answers came to mind.

I walked through rooms which seemed remarkably dust-free, even accounting for the scuttlers' work, looking for my cigarettes. In the kitchen I came across a carton of Camels – not mine, left by one of Anya's friends – and lit up.

I coughed.

"Bloody hell."

And stubbed the thing out. Had they always tasted that bad?

I searched for a baggy sweatshirt, found it. And, stashed away in the same drawer, were my Irish passport, my US bank's phone number, and my spare Bank of Ireland credit card.

Could things be looking up?

"I wonder who-o-o" – the innocent-sounding beat bounced off Starbucks' ceiling, the exposed caramel-coloured ventilation pipes – *"Who wrote the book of love?"*

Deep in a soft purple armchair, I nursed my venti cappuccino. Outside, the streets were still gloomy at eight a.m.

"Heya, Jack."

It was Maddie, Anya's best friend, standing over me with a latté and muffin in her hands. Silver sparkled from her navel where her top rode high.

And, just for a moment, I thought that sapphire light scintillated in her eyes – No. A trick of the light.

“Hi, Maddie. How’re you doing?”

“All right.” She shifted from side to side. “Mind if I, er – ?”

“Oh, please.” I pushed debris to one edge of the low table. “Sit down.”

Over the sound system came a new song: “*Laura...*” And, with a yelp: “*Yes! I’ll always remember...*”

Maddie plumped herself down, food and drink in her lap, and put her feet up on the table. It showed an abandon which had been pretty much whipped out of me in my childhood.

“What do you think of my tattoo, Jack?”

Barbed wire encircled her bare upper arm.

“Very Celtic,” I told her. *And very common*, I almost added.

I’m not usually that nasty.

I sipped my caffeine-laden foam, and watched the big Polynesian-looking guy in the black shirt supervising the other baristas, as the morning queue grew longer.

Maddie chatted about local news – something about labour relations at Comm-Ed, I think – while conspicuously failing to mention Anya.

“Oh, hell.” She looked at her fluorescent yellow/green Swatch. “I’m giving a seminar on Old Icelandic etymology, with my supervisor sitting in. I can’t be late.”

She stared at her half-eaten muffin, shrugged, quickly drained her coffee.

Then, softly: “See you around.”

Her eyes were so sad, I had to say, “I’ll walk with you, if you like.”

She brightened up.

“Would you?”

I dropped her off at the postgrad block, walked to the small, quiet building where my cluttered office waited. I stared up from the outside, then jammed my hands in my pockets and strode back to the main street.

There was a bus pulling over, its destination downtown. Its door wheezed open, the waiting people filed on board, and I climbed inside after them. I paid, went to the rear, sat down on a hot shiny seat, and wondered what I was doing.

No way I was going to embarrass myself on campus, where someone might recognize me.

But I needed to burn off the adrenaline, or I’d never get a good night’s sleep. And once, in Boyce’s Bar, a pie-eyed footballer – deep in his cups – told a bunch of us about this particular establishment. He was unsteady but huge: we paid careful attention to everything he said, until he went away.

Me in a gym? After years of lifting glasses with my right hand, I’d probably developed an asymmetric muscularity.

I craned my head upwards. It was a seven-storey building. Only in America.

Me, in there? No chance.

I shrugged, turned away. Crossing the nearest bridge, I stopped half-way across, over the green-stained Chicago

River – relic of so many St Paddy’s Day celebrations: they chuck in the dye, then drink green beer – and gave it my usual ironic smile.

I headed onwards. I needed to buy textbooks, look up papers, so forth.

And I did those things. But, when 5 p.m. rolled around, restlessness took hold of me once more, and I walked back towards the gym.

This time I went inside.

Seven storeys. Really. An airy central atrium, where a vertical climbing-wall hung. Lithe figures spidered upwards. Training areas ringed the open shaft.

“More cardio.” The trainer, who had introduced himself as Eddie Breen, gestured. “With an indoor track, but we’ll stick to the machines for now.”

Every exercise bike, treadmill and stairmill had a mounted screen, with a web browser loaded. Surf while you cycle. I’m not kidding.

“Uh, I was thinking of lifting weights...”

“Strength training, right. This way. Locker rooms are down there.”

“Okay.” Time to develop a theoretical model for this activity. “You wear special clothes, right?”

“I don’t know about special.” Eddie looked at me oddly. “Those jeans aren’t real suitable, though.”

What the hell. I was feeling extravagant.

“Is there a shop where I can buy some kit?”

“We have our own fitness store.” Eddie beamed. “Get you fitted out in no time.”

Fifteen minutes later, embarrassed in my strange new garments, I sat inside a shining chrome Steam Age apparatus, with a big pressure dial like a WWII submarine. I took hold of twin grips.

“It’s hydraulic,” Eddie told me again. “Breathe in, then push –”

The arms clanged to the end of their range.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Let me adjust this...”

And, a few minutes later:

“Y’know, perhaps we should start you on free weights.”

Upstairs it was darker, though the walls were mirrored. On a thick protective mat lay big heavy bars with knurled grips, fat black plates at either end.

I was in the right place.

“This is good,” I told Eddie.

“Well, you’re warmed up. Wanna try the deadlift?”

The deadlift, it turns out, is not just simple: it’s primeval. There’s a correct form to follow – keep looking up, or you’ll wreck your lumbar spine – but it boils down to holding breath, tensing, squatting down to grab a heavy bar, then standing upright. No intellect involved.

I loved it.

“A bit more weight?”

A hazy tunnel of concentration surrounded me, but I was peripherally aware of men and women halting their exercises to watch, as I hauled upwards once again.

“Go, man...”

"One more rep," said Eddie.
 Repetition, right.
"Pull it..."
 Straining now.
"PULL it!"
 And I did.

There were claps on my shoulder, as I left the lifting-mat. Passing a small group of swollen-bodied lifters exercising before mirrors – their alpha male was huge: his deep tan almost purple, with stiff bleached hair, stretch-marked skin – I noted their stares, and looked away.

But I remembered a booze-laden session before the TV, watching the Olympic lifting. These physique stars were strong, but powerlifters, both fat and skinny, lift heavier weights.

I stopped, turned back to the bodybuilders, nodded once, and walked on.

In the reception area, showered and dressed, I spotted one of the big guys sinking a half-litre of protein shake. Should I follow suit? Just then, a small wiry man, one of the trainers who had cheered me on, came through the doorway.

"The guys are going for a drink." He was talking to me. "Want to tag along?"

We sank a few Buds, and a bunch of other stuff. Boozing with the guys was nothing new, but my athletic status... That was very different.

Sinews moving in dark fluid –

I shut the memory out.

But after an hour or so, I passed a strange threshold. The more I drank, the more sober I grew. Cold and logical, as my body worked some metabolic – anabolic? – magic on the booze. Alcohol into muscle?

Crazier things were happening.

I stood upright, feeling fresher than I normally did on waking.

"Leavin' already, Big Jack?"

What's it to you? I nearly said.

"Sorry, guys. Gotta go."

Howard hadn't said the Three Sisters' gifts came with unexpected features. The more I thought about it, the more his actions seemed as irrational, as *manipulated*, as my own.

How long had he been working with his weird constructs?

Outside, in the chill evening air, I hunched my shoulders – already bulkier than this morning – and lumbered along the sidewalk: more carthorse than athlete. Picture me struggling up that climbing-wall. Breaking off those dinky little handholds, maybe bringing the wall down.

Up ahead, an ATM shone its low-key invitation. Sober, I realized I'd spent way too much money today. I needed cash.

From my hip pocket, I drew my shiny new replacement wallet, extracted my life-saving bank card.

"Hey, chickie, chickie..."

The voice came from behind me.

"Can ya spare a dime?" From my left.

No words from the one who came up on my right side: he was the quiet one.

Surrounded.

Not again. This couldn't be happening.

I looked over my shoulder, gaze sliding across the big guy's features. If I didn't stare, I'd never recognize him again. If I did stare, all hell would break loose.

"Don't worry, buddy. We'll keep watch. You get your money."

"Yeah." A chuckle. "Bad neighbourhood, this."

The quiet one drawled, in a voice devoid of feeling:

"Is now."

"Okay..." Hand trembling, I tried to force the card in the slot, messed it up – the quiet one reached inside his jacket – then I got it right, and the card slid in.

"Hundred bucks each," said the one behind me, "should do it."

"Nah, I want more..."

For a moment, trying to think of my PIN, my mind went blank – me, the Number King, as my old Da would say, then ruffle my hair – before I remembered: third prime greater than 3,000.

I tapped keys, waited, took card and cash in my left hand –

"Gimme, gimme, chickie..."

– and whirled around on the spot, drove my right fist deep into the big man's body.

He dropped sideways, lay convulsing on the flagstones. *Jesus Christ, what have I done?*

I looked at his two buddies. They stared at me.

Run.

I ran into the street, ignoring the traffic. Panting, trying to move my bulk faster than nature or the Three Sisters intended –

There was a metallic clatter on the sidewalk behind me, and I stopped in the middle of the road while cars swooshed past me on either side. The fallen man lay still. His two friends were legging it, sprinting away.

Shame. Because suddenly I'd had enough of running.

I walked slowly back to the ATM, and the fallen mugger. He was helpless, the big bastard who had scared me. I could drop on him with both knees, into his ribs. I could crush his throat, press my thumbs into his eyes, force them all the way in –

No.

Instead, I reached into my pocket, dug out my cellphone, dialled 911.

Red lights, white. Orange strips across the otherwise white ambulance. I stared at the vehicle, at two paramedics crouched over the unconscious man.

"Ruptured spleen?" one of them murmured.

"Could be."

Shaking my head, I turned away, just as a police cruiser pulled up.

Two big officers climbed out. One was white, the other black: otherwise they might have been twins. Keeping their

right hands lightly on their weapons, they approached.

"This the medical call?"

I nodded. "He mugged me, officer. Him and two mates."

"They got away, did they?"

"Lucky them," said his partner. Then he pointed. "What's that?"

A large knife lay on the sidewalk. The source of the clattering noise I'd heard. I remembered the quiet one, reaching inside his jacket.

"They were armed." I shivered.

"You want to take a ride?" asked the white officer, while the other cop squatted down by the knife, pulling rubber gloves from his pocket. "Make a statement and such?"

I had an image of the black cop saying *Bend over, I want to take a look*, but I suppressed the giggle. Hysteria could get me in trouble.

Behind me, ambulance doors clanged shut. The policemen looked up.

"I'll come with you," I said.

Two hours later, I was finishing up in the interview room. A burly, white-moustached sergeant named O'Connor had me sign off the statement, then told me that was everything for now.

I looked around the surprisingly clean room, almost sorry to leave, though the questions had been tough. I'd politely told them – O'Connor and a plain-faced woman whose name I never learned, who left on terminating the interview – that no, I'd never taken boxing or martial arts classes, but I had feared for my life.

The drive over, in the rear of the cruiser, sitting on a solid black plastic seat which smelled faintly of vomit and disinfectant, between no-handle doors, had worried me. Howard could've told me what a person's spleen did, what happened when it ruptured, but I had no idea. It sounded serious.

"If you don't press charges against them," said O'Connor, "then we might. But I'd say you're in the clear, especially if you drop it. Those clowns are known to us."

Then he smiled for the first time.

"Off the record, son..." He held out his hand. "Congratulations."

We shook.

Legally safe I might be, but I lay in bed shaking with nameless emotions, before sliding into a grey, dreamless sleep. And awoke in bright late-morning sunlight, feeling disconnected from the world. My hands felt rough, a little raw –

No. Surely not.

But when I looked down into the basement, the freezer wasn't where I'd left it, but in the opposite corner. How long had I spent carrying it back and forth in my sleep?

And who else was I going to assault today?

I lurched into the kitchen, banged around in the cupboards. No coffee. Jesus, why hadn't Anya – ? Well, because she didn't live here any more, for a start.

What the hell is happening to me?

I looked up at the scuttlers, who were cowering in the corner. Three of them. I snarled, before it occurred to me

to wonder where the fourth scuttler was. Surely not busy: if one was engaged in housekeeping, they all were.

But I felt bigger this morning, and that new mass had to come from somewhere.

"No. I couldn't have." My voice echoed oddly in the kitchen. "Have you guys seen – ?"

I took a step towards the scuttlers.

They began to tremble.

Oh, my God.

Gorge rising, I turned away.

I went to my usual Starbucks. This late in the morning, there was no chance of bumping into Maddie, or any of Anya's friends. I wondered what she was up to.

No. I don't care.

I was like one of those 'roid rage freaks you read about, without the benefit of drugs. It was all natural... if you could call intervention by an artificially created triplet-being, helped by an alien, natural.

I ordered pannini and cappuccino, waited by the little counter where they hand over your caffeine fix. Behind me, I sensed movement.

"Excuse me, sir. Can I – ?"

I launched myself backwards, grabbed hold of my attacker's black shirt, hurled him bodily across the floor. He landed flat on his back, in a clattering shower of mugs and plates.

"Bloody hell."

The fallen barista looked up at me, stunned.

"Look, I'm really –"

Fists bunching, the big Polynesian supervisor stepped out from behind the counter.

"I got mugged last night." That halted him. "I must be jumpy. I'm sorry."

The youth, struggling to his feet, looked uninjured.

"You'd better leave." The supervisor's voice rumbled. "Just go, all right?"

Murmuring apologies, I stumped out onto the sidewalk, feeling murderous and dirty at the same time, covered in prickling sweat.

I took a deep breath of roadside smog.

"Come on," I muttered, pulling my cellphone out of my pocket. The traffic noise was growing heavier, so I stood with my left forefinger in my ear like a numpty – a grand Scottish term I learned at an AI conference in Aberdeen – and thumb-dialled Howard's home number. "Howard? Are you there? Pick up, will you?"

The phone felt hard in my sweaty grip. His answering machine's message had a musical background, bits of Dvorak's *New World Symphony* strung together to sound like *Star Wars*...

"Hello. Is that Jack?"

"Who the hell else? Howard, I want a favour."

"Another one?"

Bastard.

"Yeah, right. One that'll do me some good. You have to get this out of me."

This time, even over the traffic's pulsating roar, I could hear concern.

"Are you all right?"

If you could call sleepwalking back and forth in a basement while carrying a huge fridge-freezer, I was bloody marvellous. "No."

After a moment, in a voice which sounded far away:

"Is it urgent? I mean, are you in trouble at the moment?"

I couldn't believe it. Gripping the phone tightly, I snarled louder than the articulated truck passing by. "Howard, I'm coming to see you right now."

"No, what I meant was, it's going to fade."

"What?"

"The implant. It can't last longer than 30 –"

There was a snapping noise.

Thirty what? Days? Hours?

Minutes?

I looked at the plastic splinters in my right hand, the scrunched remains of the phone I had crushed in my grip. My left forefinger was still in my left ear.

Thirty years?

Did you ever see *Commando*? In the movie, Arnold Schwarzenegger appears to climb out onto a jetliner's undercarriage as it's taking off, then drops onto marshy ground as the plane clears the runway and lifts up into the sky.

In an interview, Big Arnie said the director asked him, during filming, if he could perform the stunt for real: a clear case of Hollywood science subsuming reality. Real flesh and bone, even of the famous Oak Who Walks, would be splattered into strawberry trifle garnished with bone-splinters.

Despite my new strength, and the molten aggression I was finding hard to keep under control, breaking into Howard's lab was going to be a bitch.

Al Molloy isn't one for the fake Paddy scene. It was only after six months of our being drinking buddies at Martha's Hop Garden – Millers or Jim Beam were his tipple; Al couldn't drink Guinness any more than he could spell it – that he admitted his first name was Aloysius.

He was deep under the influence at the time, and I never reminded him of it, not even when he got cold feet about borrowing the company truck and forced me to up the ante to a hundred bucks.

"Since it's you," he said finally, "I'll do it."

"Thanks a million."

"That's how much your bail will cost, if they catch you at it."

"It's really not that big a deal, Al."

He said nothing, but his cynical smile held its own message: *Right. That's why you need me.*

Outside in the yard, from an open-doored truck, deliverymen were unloading crates of flour and whatever else it is you need to bake Aunt Molly's Golden Pies. They wore velcro-fastened black-and-red weightlifters' belts: a strange style which I thought was affectation, until the native penchant for litigation really came home to me.

My old Granda busted sod with his spade for seven decades with never a belt or a protein shake. Whenever he ate an apple, he first twisted it neatly into two, split-

ting it along a flat plane with no visible effort. It tasted better that way.

Hands itching, I could stand the inactivity no longer.

"Back in a minute, Al."

After ten minutes of hauling crates, slightly calmer, I was back inside Al's office. He handed me coffee; it tasted as if someone had spilled paint thinner inside.

"You sure you're not on something?" he said. "You're looking bigger."

"Clean living –"

"Uh-huh."

"– and pure thoughts."

"My girlfriend's been taking lessons," Al told me as he drove, "in how to put her man's condom on correctly."

"Yeah?" I said doubtfully.

"Absolutely. They're called anti-natal classes."

"Oh, God."

I take it back: he surely *can* spell Guinness. Imbibed it with his mother's milk.

There was a kind of warehouse built flush with the compound's perimeter wall. A slip-road ran past, granting access to a busy freeway. Fumes stank in the hot air as I cracked the passenger door open.

"Now," I said.

Part of me wanted to grab hold of Al and strangle him. Not just for the bad jokes: simple proximity made me want to fight. I really had to get inside Howard's lab.

Al stalled the engine. The big truck coughed, and stopped.

"Are you –?"

But I was already out of the cab, hauling myself up via the huge exterior mirror, onto the cab roof. I puffed, making hard work of it.

Moving quickly, I tracked the security cameras' movement. I was in a blind spot for maybe five seconds more: already, they were swinging round to investigate the truck.

My heavy shoes thumped on the cab's roof, left a black rubber smear on the paintwork – *sorry, Al* – then I was onto the truck's rear, three giant paces, leaping – *watch out* – and thumping onto the warehouse's beige corrugated roof.

Too much noise. If anyone looked from the lab blocks' windows –

Clipboard, right.

I had a grey steel clipboard stuffed down the back of my waistband. Pulling it out, I slowed to a walk – out of the cameras' fields of view – as if I'd every right to be here.

No voices cried out; no alarms wailed.

From below, a muttering, two people talking, then voices fading as they went inside. There was a drain-pipe – new, heavy black plastic – and I stuffed the clipboard back into my waistband, grabbed hold, swung myself over the edge.

Ten seconds later I was standing on pale concrete inside the compound, staring at the lab block, wondering how to get in.

Whiff of smoke...

For a second the old tobacco desire rose inside; my new-found sensibilities quelled it. Then I realized... With

a mental pat on the head for my old addiction, I pulled out my clipboard, walked across the concrete.

From outside the compound, a low-throated rumble: the truck, Al driving off.

At the fire exit, four smokers were finishing up. The one who had been leaning against the door sighed, dropped her stub to the concrete, ground it out with her running-shoe's heel. All four were technicians, I guessed. I knew none of them.

"You want – ?"

One of them was holding the door open.

"No, thanks. I'm good here."

They nodded, and filed inside. I could hear their voices echo and fade along the interior corridor, as the door swung slowly shut.

Wait...

Just before it closed, I lunged forward – *now!* – and my fingertips caught the edge.

Got it.

If you enter the lab-block as per normal, then you pass through DOD-supplied military-grade scanner-linked locks. But the DOD are mostly concerned with secure comms, and the ultra-high-bandwidth connection to the New Mexico compound; Howard's extracurricular activities had little to do with that. I was coming in the back way, prepared to use my steel clipboard as a jimmy.

Wood splintered around the lock, and then I was in a storage room, in a clutter of half-unpacked equipment and empty crates. The outer door was open.

Something drew me forwards, an invisible tug, until I reached the Three Sisters' darkened room. Behind permeable membrane they twisted, pulsed. No sign of the eye.

"Come hate..."

"Come love..."

Fists bunched, shoulders bowed, I advanced. Part of me wanted to lash out, to reach into the dark viscous fluid, to strangle them if I could – or haul them out into the air: see if they died gasping like landed fish. But you can't act like some permanently enraged gorilla and survive in civilization. Look what happened to King Kong.

"Come strength..."

I plunged my fist inside, grabbed hold of a tendril. Wet, rubbery... But I wouldn't let go. I wanted its – their – attention to be properly focused.

Easy, now.

A deep breath, then:

"I need your help."

"Yes-s-s."

I think their overlapping voices were purely in my head.

"Soon, it will fade."

"I need it destroyed, right now. The implant. Make it go away."

An attenuated hissing, in my mind, as of surf retreating.

"It fades, but the effect remains."

That didn't sound good.

"It goes away in 30 days?"

"Then you will be human once more."

There was a logical way to progress this, if only I could

see it. *Human once more...* So what was I now?

I whispered: "Take it away. Please..."

"Impossible..."

"But you offered me a choice." Between love and hate.

"Of love. The choice of love..."

That was the answer.

"Yes!"

"To see the love, not feel the hatred..."

"Please, for pity's sake. Can you *change* the implant's properties, even if you can't remove it?"

"Yes. It..."

"Oh, God. When – ?"

"...is done."

I collapsed backwards – hand slurping free of the membrane-enclosed fluid – and banged my ass hard against the floor. I sat there, stunned.

What happened?

Then a door crashed open, and Howard yelled, furious:

"Jack! What the hell have you done?"

Membrane partially dissolved, tore open.

Dark fluid gushed out across the floor. It washed around me where I sat, soaking my trousers. Inside the torn membrane, tendrils collapsed.

Blue...

Just for a moment, I glimpsed a glowing network, the stuff beneath reality, and it seemed that a lone eye winked. Then the sapphire blaze faded.

Only a wet, abandoned mess remained.

Gone.

"You stupid –"

"They were never yours, Howard."

"What d'you – ? Right. Don't think we're still friends. I'm calling the –"

His voice faded as I stood up, muscles tensed, clothes dripping.

I still have the strength, or most of it.

"You didn't create them." I relaxed, let my voice grow gentle. In that final moment, I'd understood something of their nature. "They hitchhiked their way into our reality, piggybacked on your automata."

"Our reality?"

"They were *other*, old pal. Never yours."

Howard might have taken it further – anger still flickered like steady flames in his eyes – but then a familiar female voice called out from the corridor, and his resolution faded.

"What's going on in there?"

Howard's gaze slid away from mine.

"Are you all right, hon – ?" Concerned voice, trailing off.

Anya stood in the doorway.

She looked at me, then back at Howard, and in that moment everything became clear. Not just Howard's guilty motivation, but the fact that I had no business interfering in their relationship. I could never be part of Anya's life, and I had the Three Sisters to thank for that insight.

Joining her eyes to Howard's, blazing tendrils of pink/scarlet light hung in the air: invisible to them but obvious to me. No argument I could ever make would

deny the strength of that love, the power of the bond which joined them.

Downtown Chicago was a night-time delight, strung through with arcs of light. Pure white resonance joined children to their loving parents – see there: the little girl with royal-blue hair-ribbons, staring up at her plump, pretty mother browsing in a store window. And the confused scarlet incandescence of two body-pierced young women, clutching hands and stumbling quickly along the sidewalk, looking for privacy.

I laughed. Had there been a flower-seller nearby, I'd have rushed up with a bunch of roses and told the young women that, yes, they belonged together.

"Excuse me, young man."

It was an old woman who spoke. I got out of her way as, shaking slightly, she and her bent-over husband – he had two full shopping-bags – walked to a waiting yellow cab.

The driver got out. "Hello, Mrs Cuthelson."

As they climbed inside, the driver turned to look at me.

"Any problem?"

"Oh, no." I smiled. "Just admiring them, y'know?"

"Right." He relaxed. "They remind me of my own parents."

Some part of him recognized what I could see clearly: that the bond which joined the old couple was neither red nor white but a glowing sapphire blue, a deep resonance like the underlying energy-stuff I'd glimpsed before, the structure of spacetime itself.

I walked on among the streets and malls, admiring the light-show which complemented the obvious brightness of electric illumination: the glistening buildings, the sparkling stores. Taverns which brought their own mellow warmth to the night.

Who would have thought there was so much love, here in the heart of the Windy City?

The link between quantum-entangled particles can be surprisingly robust. That mystic, time-denying bond survives all sorts of attempts to separate the particles' states. Ram one half of the pair through a solid metal sheet: still the couple remain as one.

Is this the basis of true love? Breathing in a lover's spawned particles? Or something deeper, a process which reaches beneath the normal layers of reality?

Or perhaps it is not quantum, but a higher-level pairing, an emergent resonance between two complex neural structures: the standing wave of love.

"Jack!"

Up ahead, a slim form was waving at me.

"Over here!"

I called back a greeting:

"Hello, Maddie."

As I drew closer, I saw something strange: not a fiery link, but a brief sputtering evanescence, like a fire trying to start.

Sapphire sparks, just for a moment, scintillated in her eyes.

"I just spotted you. I was out shopping."

"Bought anything good?" I asked.

"The new Barbara Kingsolver." Maddie raised her black Borders bag. "I can't wait to get home to..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Well, I don't want to keep you from it." I could have turned away, but she looked so open, so vulnerable; I couldn't leave her. "But I haven't been in a bookstore for days. Fancy a coffee in Barnes & Noble?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

We walked north along State Street, side by side, as traffic thrummed past.

Blue sparkles? What did that mean? That Maddie had feelings for me? One-sided feelings? I hadn't thought about her before, or not much. She was pale-complexioned – I stole a glance – and sensitive, clutching her book like a kid with a favourite toy.

Maybe I couldn't see my own feelings in the same way as others'. Was that it?

I held the door open – Maddie smiled brightly – and we went inside the bookstore. A faint smell of polish hung upon the clean, chilled air; the soft murmurs of browsing shoppers overlaid background guitar music: Rodrigo's lovingly crafted *Concierto d'Aranjuez*.

"What would you like?"

"I'd love a frappuccino." Maddie spoke as if in a dream, and stared at me.

Her eyes sparkled with a deep wonder, and in that moment I was ensnared.

We chatted about books, I bought a couple, then we took ourselves to the nearest Italian restaurant for fat-crustured pizzas with all the trimmings. The place was warm and bustling, bright with conversation. I smiled: at the company; at the yeasty, spicy smells; at being in a crowded room with no urge whatsoever to punch somebody out.

Thank you. I toasted the Three Sisters silently, with my diet Coke.

Maddie took it as a compliment to her, and clinked her glass against mine.

Beside us, a large group of thirtysomething men and women around a table were laughing: colleagues swapping banter about the day's work, while their partners rolled their eyes. Two of the men wore ties, loosened; the others were more casual.

"You should've seen Rory's face when Bob said to redraft the contract –"

Chortles, one mock groan.

The Rory they were talking about sat at the confluence of two pairs of twin light-ribbons. Gently glowing catenary curves linked him to his wife, sitting beside him... But other arcs, blazing with scarlet heat, fluoresced between him and the predatory-looking female colleague across the table, staring hungrily.

At our table, it was a quiet moment. Maddie laid her hand atop mine. I gently squeezed her fingers, still fascinated by the neighbouring table.

Something changed.

Colours flickered, shifted, then Rory's wife was looking from him to the woman across the table, then back to her husband. Her face paled.

"You two could've told me." Her voice, low and hard, stopped all other conversation. "Did you think you could get away with it?"

I looked away, too late.

To the other side, a family group was sitting. The corpulent husband – linked tenuously to his children, not at all to his wife – was burning the air with the heat of his desire for the pretty waitress who smiled at him. This was getting worse.

"Maddie, I think I ought to –"

There was a crash of crockery from the business folk's table.

"You *bitch*."

"Goddamn cheatin' bastard!"

A sharp smack.

I rose quickly, pulling out my billfold, counting out notes with a shaking hand. There was only one thing I could think of: in the quantum world, the act of observation affects the state of reality –

"What's wrong, Jack?"

"Not you, dear. It's a kind of... agoraphobia. Honest."

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't –" But then I relented. "Maddie, this is in no way a proposition. But your place is a lot closer than mine, isn't it?"

"Sure." A little frown, now.

"Can I stay just for a coffee? Then I promise I'll go."

After a pause: "Sure. Come on."

"If you think the kids and I are staying here while you –"

Two other fights were breaking out by the time we left.

We walked quickly, passing the corner of Wabash and State just as a plain-faced woman spun around and sank a beautiful uppercut – without warning, like a pro – into her husband's soft stomach. He puked, dropping to his knees.

"Is the world going mad?" she asked.

Beside us, a German Shepherd looked up at his owner, and growled.

"Something like that." I took her arm, and we crossed the street. "I hoped it was just me."

But I knew it was real. And I knew I was going to tell her everything.

"There's a cab."

I stepped out – dangerously close to passing cars: one of them honked – and flagged down the yellow taxi. It stopped and we slid inside. Maddie rattled off her address.

"We're in a hurry." She leaned forward with a handful of bills.

"You got it, sweetheart."

But the driver was muttering about his girlfriend by the time we drew up before Maddie's apartment block, in a quiet street close to Loyola University. God alone knew what might happen if I started watching those celibate Jesuit academics: an unprecedented theological disaster.

Thirty days...

It would wear off, this effect, by itself. They had promised, those Three Sisters. But if I stayed in Chicago for another month, the city would be in flames.

"Hey, sounds like you met the Norns." Maddie, a glass of Irish whisky in hand, gestured to the *Elder Edda* upon the nearest bookshelf. "Y'know, the Fates."

"Right."

My coffee was upon the low table between us. I picked it up, sipped. *Stay alert*.

"And Howard's working with an actual alien? That's way cool. Anya said he ought to wear a black suit to work, but then she wouldn't explain..."

"Fates." I put my coffee down. "Is that like the Furies?"

It sounded insane, just like every other possible explanation. Maddie shrugged.

Then, wobbling slightly, she leaned across the table.

"How about you and me, Jack? What does your sense tell you about us?"

I touched her cheek lightly, but sat back.

"Not a thing, Maddie. I can only see what other people feel."

"But –" She stopped, straightened. "I kinda thought you were handing me a line, Jack. But you're not."

"No." I looked around – brick walls, shelves, copper pots hanging by their handles – as though for escape. "I've got to go somewhere quiet. I mean really isolated."

"Yes," she said quietly. "You do."

There was an angry yell from the sidewalk outside, below the window. Maddie got up quickly, pulled heavy maroon drapes across.

We sat in silence for a while, then Maddie suddenly asked:

"Haven't you got an open-ended ticket back to Shannon?"

"Right, yes." We'd talked about it at Anya's birthday party. "Helped me get the visa. Showed I could always leave if things went wrong."

"So what about someplace quiet in the Irish countryside?"

"That would... No."

I could just envisage O'Hare Airport collapsing in a tumultuous, swirling riot as I walked through crowded passenger lounges, igniting conflict just by my presence. Or a plane overtaken by consensual air rage, diving nose-first into the grey Atlantic.

Maddie smiled, her dark eyes bewitching.

"I've got it."

I made the trip home to the Ould Country tranquillized out of my head. I remember Maddie shoving me into a taxi during the bright morning hours; she might have got in beside me. From some point in the hazy dream I recall: *"I'll be waiting. Don't forget me, Jack."*

A flight attendant – on medical orders written out by Maddie's ex-boyfriend (a drugstore owner whose fiery eyes were for his new love, not for Maddie) – brought me stronger pills shortly after takeoff, and possibly once more midflight. I knew nothing until someone shook me into semi-wakefulness at the far end.

A taxi took me through the grey city and beyond, on a long, winding ride through rain-washed emerald countryside, to the O'Neills' farmhouse for an overnight stay.

"Well, come in, willya."

O'Neill himself was a big bluff man with weather-browed skin and massive square hands, who took my luggage as though it weighed nothing.

"Ye'll be stayin' upstairs tonight. I'll drive ye to the cottage tomorrow."

"Thanks a million."

"Dinner's in the scullery in 20 minutes."

"That'll be grand."

Pure air cleared my head, reawakened my appetite. I descended the solid oak stairs, headed into the red-tiled scullery at the rear of the farmhouse. The big table was set for three. O'Neill was sitting, a half-pint of Guinness to hand, while his large apron-clad wife busied herself at the stove. A black-and-white collie lay curled in a basket, watching me with liquid-brown eyes.

"This'll be the missus," O'Neill waved at his wife as she turned around, a steaming dish of vegetables in her strong hands.

Brawny forearms, a wide flat face, and shoulders bigger than her husband's. I wouldn't dream of arguing with her. Mrs O'Neill nodded in satisfaction, ordered me to sit.

"Ye need to put some flesh on yer bones." She ladled out huge portions, then put my plate down. "There's more where that came from, mind."

"This is wonderful," I said, as O'Neill frowned, then nodded. "Thank you."

Soon, as we ate, we were chatting about the state of the world: Middle Eastern politics, and whether Tipperary might win the hurling again this year. No shining bond joined the O'Neills. They were self-sufficient, comfortable in each other's company and the dog's. The collie's name was Fergus: a valued employee. They managed sheep as well as the holiday cottages they rented to outsiders.

"Had the Bishop of Galway out there once," said Mrs O'Neill.

"Aye, and the less said about that," O'Neill muttered into his glass, "the better."

Two helpings later, I pushed away my plate and sighed.

"Well done, sure." Mrs O'Neill nodded to me, glared at her husband as though to say: *I told you so*. Then: "Ye'll be ready for some pudding, itself?"

An hour later, heavy and drowsy, I dragged myself up to bed.

But, confused from jet-lag and tranquillizer-hangover, I woke in chill pre-dawn greyness and stumbled to the narrow window. Cold floorboards creaked beneath my bare feet as I drew back the lace curtains, stared out onto silvery frost-touched fields.

From the O'Neills' bedroom window, tenuous curves of light spread through soft mist. They led to bulky, shadowed forms clustered by a hedgerow, beneath a dark oak.

One of the shapes emitted a low, drawn-out sound:

"Baaaa!"

And the whole flock shuffled to one side.

"Holy Mary Mother of God," I muttered, in a voice like my sainted mother's.

I climbed back into the brass-framed bed, pulled the heavy blankets up over my head, and buried my face in the big pillows, eyes squeezed shut.

Next morning, O'Neill gave me some funny looks on the drive out to the cottage, but I was too embarrassed to speak. At the green-painted doorway, though, I gave him a couple of hundred euros in exchange for getting goods delivered from the nearest village shop.

"If they could throw in a couple of A4 pads," I added, "and some felt-tip pens, a few pencils, that would be grand."

"All right." O'Neill nodded, climbed back into his battered old Land Rover, and drove back up the slate-coloured track, through the gateway, was gone.

I took my bags inside.

The living-room's floor looked traditional, paved with black stone, but there was under-floor heating and no reason to use the open peat-burning fireplace unless I felt like it. Leaning out of the bedroom window, I could see all the way down sloping fields to the gravelly beach beyond, cold Atlantic waves washing into the bay, and the tiny village of Collickneen which crouched upon the far point.

No phones. No computers.

"Very good," I said to no one. "Alone at last."

That was three days ago. When the deliveries arrived – I hid around the back until the messenger had gone – I unpacked them to find lots of food and drink, but only the essentials. Milk and bread – heavy soda bread, but so creamy it's white – went straight into the freezer: a big enamelled contraption which I vowed not to haul around at night.

Food aplenty, but no cigarettes or booze. I won't seek out either one. I'm going cold turkey on the old addictions until I leave this place, next month. Then we'll see.

Not that I'm going jogging on the beach, either. If I decide to start working out later, it'll be interesting to see if any of my previous strength remains.

This morning I took a lined pad and two pens, one blue, one black, sat upon the warm wooden gate – it's almost silvery with age, smooth and comfortable – and tried to make mathematical sense of the past week's occurrences. I've a hint, a notion, that you can describe interconnect-edness without equations or automata: more a superposition of both.

It's unformed intuition. Right now I'm mostly just sitting here, watching bunched clouds above white-tipped waves, listening to the gulls, breathing in the salt-fresh lung-cleansing air. Can I ever go back to live in a big city, on either side of this restless ocean?

From beneath a hedgerow on my right comes a liquid trill: *Crroo-crroo*.

You don't see wood-pigeons in Chicago. Not where I live.

I tap the notepad with my pen. Last night sirens wailed in Collickneen, and I watched the flashing blue lights of Gardai squad-cars. But it was Saturday: just normal drunken trouble. Surely nothing to do with me.

Don't think about it.

Entangled Eyes Are Smiling

The clouds shift, and something stirs at the edge of my mathematical vision, not quite ready to reveal itself. *Later. Don't rush it.*

There are several wood-pigeons, a small flock of plump, dark-grey birds, feeding beneath the foliage. Two of them, side by side in shadow, are obviously paired. If I look closely, I can see the faintest glimmer of light connecting –

But even as I slip down from the gate, I glimpse the other bond, from the cock-pigeon to another curvaceous hen. Mrs Pigeon's cooing drops in pitch as I walk faster, up the path towards the cottage.

Perhaps I should work indoors. Maybe write a letter to Maddie.

See you in a month?

John Meaney's third and most recent novel was *Context* (2002). His previous books were *To Hold Infinity* (1998) and *Paradox* (2000), and he was the subject of a memorable interview (by Molly Brown) which appeared in *Interzone* 158. His previous stories in the magazine include "Sharp Tang" (issue 82), "Parallax Transform" (issue 89), "A Bitter Shade of Blindsight" (issue 110), "The Dreamlode" (issue 158) and "The Whisper of Discs" (issue 183). He lives in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

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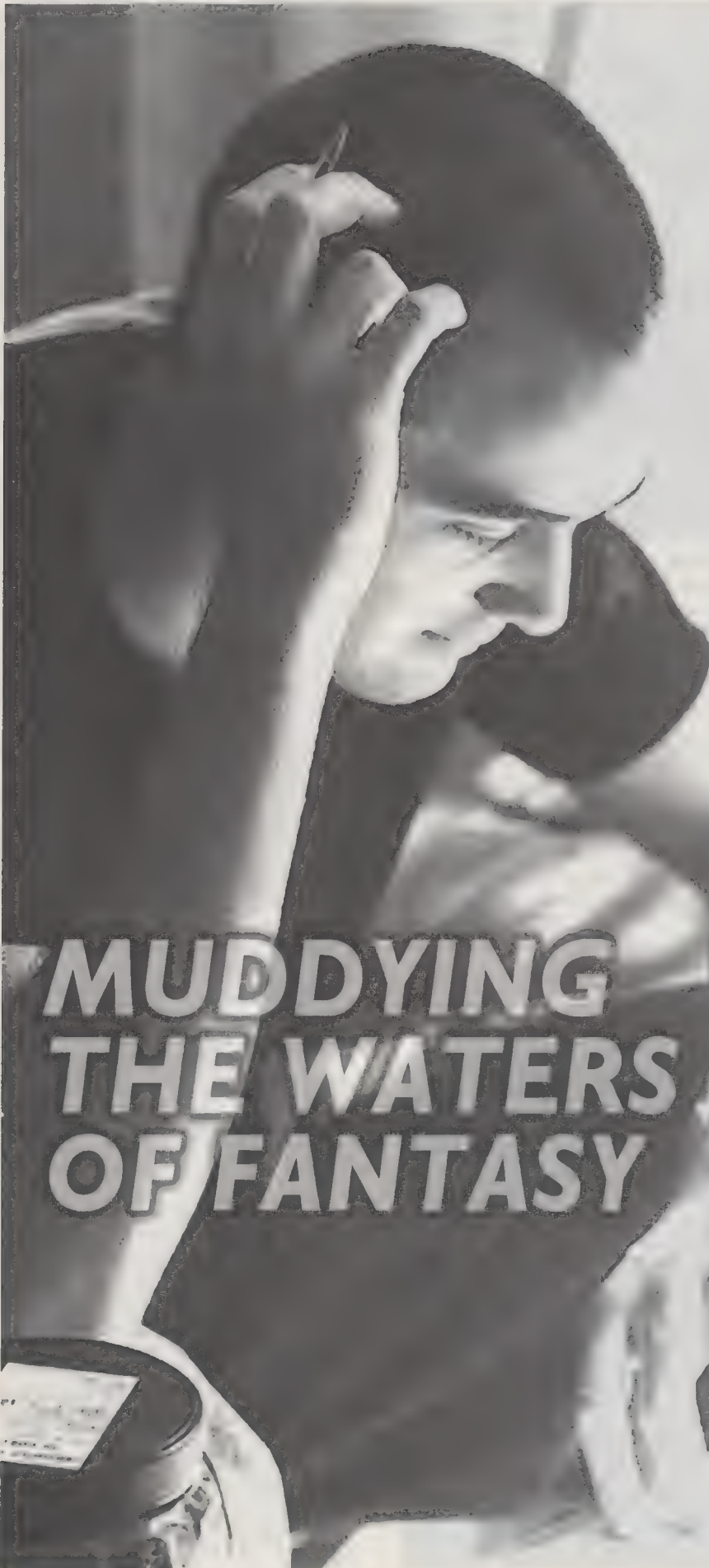
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In the past couple of years, Chris Wooding's reputation as a writer has grown dramatically. Having written various juvenile books for Scholastic, including the nine-volume Broken Sky serial novel (see the bibliography at the end of this interview), he gained widespread recognition for The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray (2001), a sizeable young-adult fantasy set in a gaslit Victorian world, which won the Silver Smarties Award. In the spring of 2003 his latest young-adult novel, Poison, set in a fantasy land, and his debut adult fantasy novel, The Weavers of Saramyr, were both published.

MUDDYING THE WATERS OF FANTASY

Chris Wooding
interviewed by
Iain Emsley

Chris, you're still only 25; so how old were you when you started writing for publication?

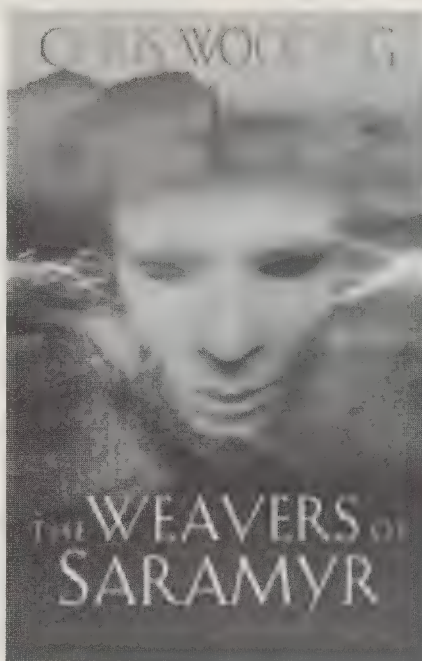
I've been writing novels since I was 16, and through sheer persistence (and by dint of my age, I'm pretty sure) I got an agent at 18 and sold my first book to Scholastic at 19. From that point on I wrote all through university, and when I left I decided to give it a go as a full-time author, since that was what I had always wanted to do anyway and because my complete lack of work experience made me unemployable. I've been doing that ever since. Counting the nine-part Broken Sky children's fantasy, I've got 16 books to my name now.

You are well known as a children's writer, so why move into adult fantasy? Do you find yourself writing differently?

Wooding: The intention was there to write for adults since the beginning; the book that got me picked up by my agent was an adult sf/horror thing not a million miles away from Species. It was her who persuaded me to try writing a book for the teenage market, and that got snapped up by Scholastic pretty much immediately, so naturally I kept on doing them. My early stuff was much more grounded in realism, but it's really obvious if you look at my books chronologically how I was gradually working my way around to what I originally intended to do, which is adult fantasy/sf. I'd have made my run earlier, but it's taken me this long to be financially secure enough as a full-time author to be able to take the time away from the YA market to write Weavers of Saramyr and the other two books in the trilogy for Gollancz. Plus it was a matter of learning my craft; I don't think I could have written that book two or three years ago.

As for writing differently, it's not really an issue since I never "wrote down" to children. My last two books in the YA market (The Haunting of Alaizabel Cray and Poison) I think would be just as happy on the adult shelves. The only real difference is the age of the protagonists. With Weavers..., because I started writing with a cast of adult characters they naturally started taking off in adult directions. Plus it's nice to be able to indulge my sick side, knowing that nobody's going to try and sue me when their kid starts skinning the neighbour's dog.

Weavers of Saramyr starts out like a standard fantasy but it seems to question the role of women in the genre: they seem to hold the actual power during the machinations of the families and also challenge the male



characters within the religion and how it is used – don't they?

There is a gender issue in Weavers..., but I wasn't making a comment on the role of women in fantasy, other than I find more pro-active female characters far more interesting than ones who sit around to provide something for the men to fight over. Most of the protagonists in Weavers... are women, but that's because I tend to feel that men are a little more disassociated from nature through having a much smaller part in the process of childbirth and so on, and Weavers... is very much concerned with the natural and the unnatural, with nature and anti-nature. Equally, that's why the most prominent male character is a priest of the goddess of nature; his beliefs are called very much into question throughout the book, because the



events that occur around him make him wonder how rigid his faith is and whether he can allow it to bend to accommodate what he thinks is right. There's not too much I can say about the male-female dynamic, though, without giving away whole chunks of the book and the rest of the trilogy.

You also seem to question the idea of "normality" in conventional fantasy, what with the Aberrants confronting the fear of difference...

The fear of difference I think is at the crux of most of humankind's problems, to be honest, so I'm surprised that it doesn't crop up more often in fantasy. Often – particularly in traditional fantasy – a character is evil for no other reason than because they're evil, and I don't think that's enough. An orc (or whatever sub-human orc-analogue you like) is ugly and bad and should probably be killed before it kills you; never mind the fact that it's probably been driven to poverty by dwarves mining away all the gold and jewels in its habitat or that the elves have stolen all the good real estate in the forests. The issue of normality in fantasy is particularly key, because it is often used to draw very black-and-white distinctions between good and evil and sidestep any moral considerations altogether. The wholesome, cultured heroes happily hack up the smelly, uncultured enemies, and the issue of why they are doing it is not tackled all that often. It's us versus them, and we're automatically assumed to be on the side of right. I just like to muddy the waters by giving some of my characters a moral conscience.

I find my own concerns tend to bleed over into whatever I'm writing, and fantasy is a wonderful medium for holding a mirror up to the world, as its very setting tends to make it seem less didactic and judgmental than a contemporary novel would if it were tackling the same thing. The people of Saramyr, from the peasants up to the noble classes, hate and fear those that they see as impure of body to the extent that they will kill their own children rather than suffer an Aberrant to live. It's an ingrained reaction that even the heroines of the story have, and it's only when they're forced by circumstance to question that received wisdom that they find out how groundless it is. Even within the setting of a fantasy book, it's quite an appalling attitude to have; but in the end it's only a reflection of the equally appalling way that people treat each other in real life.

What made you play with fantasy in Poison? Is this a comment on plot-

driven fantasy versus character-driven fantasy?

Not really. That story was more about free will and determinism. With *Poison* I wanted to play about with the fairy-tale setting, because I find fairy tales appeal to something primal that makes them timeless. Even in this day and age, young kids are terrified of the traditional image of a warty old witch. There's something enduring in that, if it can survive from "Hansel and Gretel" through *Macbeth* and *The Wizard of Oz* and still scare children now. I originally went to university to study folklore – they discontinued the course after my first year – and the kind of things I found out there made me realize how truly gruesome some of those tales were. In the original "Sleeping Beauty," she's not awakened by her Prince; instead, when he can't wake her, he rapes her in her sleep and nine months later she gives birth. It's the baby suckling on her breast that wakes her, not the kiss from the Prince. Disney stole the edge from our fairy tales; I just wanted to steal it back.

In your children's fantasy, you don't hold any punches with the horror of what is being written about. Was this a conscious choice or just how the story worked out as you wrote it?

Wooding: I'm not sure exactly what you mean by that: whether you're talking about the horror of the creatures and events that the characters face, or the horror of worlds in which they live. If the former, I actually think I'm very much understated as far as horror goes. I subscribe to the theory that what you don't see is far more scary than what you do. Graphically eviscerating someone doesn't make the reader afraid, it makes them throw up. I much prefer writers like H.P. Lovecraft and films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Ring* (the Japanese original, not the shabby American remake for people who can't handle subtitles). An individual's imagination is a far more powerful tool if you don't show them what they should be scared of.

As for the worlds that *The Haunting of Alazabel Cray* and *Poison* deal with – respectively, a grim Victorian London overrun by daemons and a fairy-tale realm in which humans are vermin – no, I don't hold any punches; but then, I don't really write with any age group in mind. Even if I did, I wouldn't tone it down; I don't think anyone should be coddled by fiction, least of all adolescents. If they're bright enough to read to that level, then they're bright enough to deal with the fact that the world can be a very nasty place and that humankind as a whole has done (and still does) some unbelievably evil acts, and I like

to believe that the concepts in those particular books might make them pause to think about things that may not otherwise occur to them... And certainly won't if they keep on reading Sweet Valley High for the rest of their lives.

Do you think that children read differently from adults? Do you think that fiction should be, to some degree, didactic?

This is terribly broad generalization, but I think children are less cynical than adults, and suspension of disbelief comes easier to them. They haven't "seen it all before" yet. When I was a teenager, one in five books I read would really knock me off my feet; now it's more like one in 20, if that. That's not a matter of the quality of the books, it's just that I'd never read anything like them back then. Stories were new and amazing, and I was mesmerized by the simple joy of reading. I never used to think in terms of genre or characterization or whether an author had succeeded in trying to get a point across. I have to dig a lot harder now to find something that blows me away.

As to fiction being didactic, I don't believe it necessarily has to be. A story is a story: that's the most important thing. When a message gets in the way of that, then it's a lecture. If the author's opinions creep into the tale then that's no bad thing; the reader can choose to be influenced by them or not. But I wouldn't say that a book has to have a message at all. That said, having been through an English Literature degree, I've met people who could find allegory in a six-year-old's crayon scrawl, so I guess

whether something is didactic or not is really a subjective matter. You could argue that every book is didactic if you stretch the point far enough, because it conveys through the characters and the story – consciously or not – the author's ideas on heroes and villains, values and morals.

You mentioned that fantasy is a good medium for holding up a mirror to the contemporary world. Can you expand on that, given that a fair amount of commercial fantasy fails to do this?

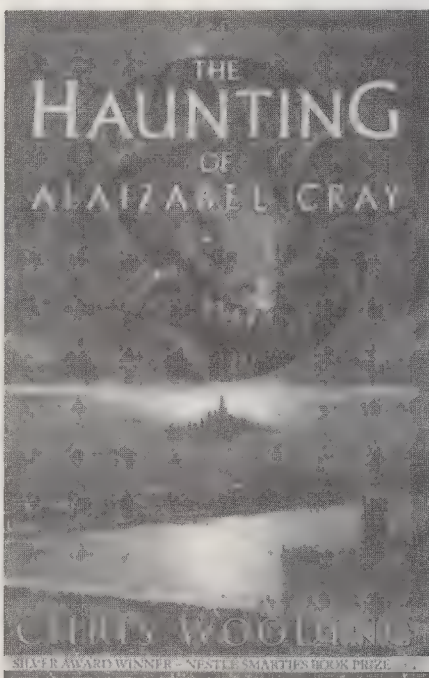
The unreality of the setting is what makes it so effective. With books set in the real world, the preconceptions are already in place, and any message the author is trying to convey is coloured by the reader's own opinions on the subject. There's no assumed history in fantasy but what the author chooses to tell you, no heroes or villains until they have proved themselves as such. The reader (hopefully!) ends up looking at the characters as characters and judges them by what they do, rather than attaching their own personal stereotypes to them. Of course, traditional fantasy has its own batch of stereotypes, but nobody's compelled to use them! I'm obviously not saying that you can't reflect the contemporary world effectively in any other medium, only that in fantasy you can change anything you want and you start with a blank slate, so it's much easier to disguise and circumvent the immediately recognizable elements that come from sharing a society with the person who wrote the book. Nobody likes to be preached at. If you're trying to put across a message, it's much more likely to penetrate if done subtly.

What do think about the future of young-adult fantasy given the J.K. Rowling / Harry Potter phenomenon and Philip Pullman's denial that he writes fantasy?

Wooding: I think it's a lot brighter than it was a few years ago. Look at what Philip Reeve is doing, and Clive Barker. There's a very fertile sense of wonderment in the YA audience, and if you can catch them before they become jaded then so much the better. I can understand Philip Pullman not wanting to associate himself with fantasy as a genre, since that tag still bears the sword-'n'-sorcery connotations and his books are a lot harder to classify than that. But between all the writers producing offbeat fantasy fiction in the YA market, I believe the term is losing the stigma it once had.

Which writers influenced you?

I've no idea. Influence is such an unconscious thing. I sometimes read back over passages that I've written



Muddying the Waters in Fantasy

and think, "that's a lot like so-and-so," but it's never really premeditated. I often find I'm influenced as much by ideas in books that I don't like as much as in ones that I do. I read a lot of horror as a child – Stephen King, James Herbert, Dean Koontz and so forth – as well as a lot of traditional fantasy and sf. Then I kind of fell out with the horror genre and I pretty much stopped reading it. Tolkien was an influence, obviously, but I tend to use his works as a template to avoid. Not that I'm belittling *The Lord of the Rings* at all, it's one of my favourite stories ever; it's just that it's such an imitated book and there's no way I'd want to add another tome to five decades of elves and dwarves and goblins crowding the bookshelves. Lately I've become far more fond of the works of writers who are much more off-the-wall in their approach to fantasy – M. John Harrison, China Miéville, Clive Barker and so on. In my eyes, Hayao Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of Wind* is still just about the greatest fantasy/sf story ever told; though it's a graphic novel, it still leaves everything else in the genre standing.

For further information on Chris Wooding's books see his website: www.chriswooding.com

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* The bibliography of the *Broken Sky* serial-novels in highly confusing. Chris Wooding explains:

"Originally, my intention was to write three fairly big children's fantasy novels titled *Broken Sky: Act 1*, *2* and *3* respectively. Scholastic then decided to publish them as a kind of monthly instalment serial, breaking them down into 27 parts (nine per Act) of very small books. Nine of these were released before the idea was scrapped as bookshops really didn't know what to do with these tiny little books. Those were the January-September 1999 releases. Then the books were re-released from the following January, in bigger volumes, each part comprising three of the smaller parts (i.e. compressing the whole series into nine books rather than the proposed 27). I think the first three (Act 1, the nine parts that had already been released) came out in January 2000, with the rest (Parts 4-9 of the new series) coming out bimonthly after that.

"That's why it took from 1999 to 2001 to get the whole series out: it was restarted at the beginning of 2000. It's not an easy thing to keep track of. The first editions (the tiny ones) have been pulped now, so it's only the second editions that exist. I hope all that makes some kind of sense!"

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ART BY DAVID HO

The Frozen Woman

Eric Brown

I was about to start work on an article for the local free paper when the phone rang.

I snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Amy Sullivan?" a male voice asked.

"Yes."

"Amy Sullivan, the journalist?"

"That's me," I said, though journalist was something of a misnomer these days. I waitressed at the local whole-food restaurant between commissions, which was most of the time.

"I represent Timothy Masters," he said. And left it at that.

The name was familiar. I recall wondering where I'd heard it before. A minor TV celebrity? A local musician yet to make it big? But why would Masters's representative contact me?

Then the penny dropped. "Oh, my God," I said.

"Mr Masters would like to meet you."

"Me?" I said, incredulous.

"You and no one else but you. He's currently staying at Dudley manor in Shropshire. If you could get here for three this afternoon."

"Of course," I said, more than a little bemused. He gave me directions to the place, then rang off.

For years I'd been waiting for a break, an article or feature accepted by one of the nationals. Of late I'd come to accept that I'd never amount to anything more than a provincial hack.

And then, out of the blue, Timothy Masters contacts me. Timothy Masters, the Frozen Man.

Dudley manor was a 17th-century stately home set amid rolling parkland and extensive beech-woods. I made the hundred-mile cross-country journey in a little under two hours, wondering all the way what Masters might want with me.

Perhaps 20 cars and a BBC outside-broadcast van were parked bumper to bumper in the long driveway. I left my beat-up VW Golf at the end of the drive and began walking. A posse of journalists and reporters kicked their heels outside the manor's imposing façade.

Before I reached them, a man in a blue suit apprehended me and said, "Ms Sullivan?

If you'd care to come this way..."

I followed him around the side of the manor, but not before we'd been seen by a couple of the more eagle-eyed reporters. They gave chase.

"What do you know about Masters?"

"What has the Frozen Man said about his experience?"

Blue Suit hurried me through a side door and closed it firmly in the faces of our pursuers.

Without a word he led me through the manor. I took in plush-carpeted corridors, walls hung with what looked like Turners and Constables.

I thought of a question. "Can you tell me what Masters is doing here?"

The man paused in his purposeful striding. "Masters worked in the garden of the manor before his... his affliction, shall we say? Lord Dudley saw to his hospital care. He's a guest here until his recovery is complete."

Altruistic Lord Dudley, I thought. Or did his Lordship have an eye for the benefits that might accrue from harbouring the Golden Goose?

The man indicated a door. "After you."

We passed into a vast drawing room. To the left, a pair of French windows stood open, admitting a fragrant summer breeze.

Two men stood before the door, looking out. I recognized one of them, from his frequent TV appearances, as Lord Dudley.

The other, a grey-haired man in his 50s, introduced himself as William Grant, Timothy Masters's legal representative. It was to Grant I had spoken on the phone that morning.

Lord Dudley gave me the once-over, obviously wondering why Masters had demanded to see me, a worn-out, overweight 30-something who couldn't even afford a decent wardrobe.

I was just as intrigued.

"Masters said nothing other than he wants to see you," Lord Dudley said. "As soon as he... ah... came round, he mentioned only your name."

I asked the question that had been bothering me for

hours. "And why does he want to see me?"

Grant gestured through the French windows. "You can ask him that yourself."

A long, enclosed garden stretched away into the distance, all topiaried hedges, immaculate flower-beds and gravel pathways. Perhaps 50 yards away, on a bench beside an ornamental fish pond, I made out a seated figure.

I took a hesitant step from the house, overcome then with a sudden apprehension.

I looked back. The three men were watching me. Grant gestured me on. I left the manor and walked along the path towards the Frozen Man.

I'd read about Masters, of course, as had just about every other literate citizen in the world.

Almost a year ago, while strolling down the aisle of a supermarket in Shrewsbury, Masters had stopped in the act of reaching out for a can of baked beans.

Stopped.

And never completed the move. Never, though it was hard to believe, started up again.

At first, wary shoppers suspected some in-store promotion. A mime artist employed by Sainsbury's or Heinz.

But there was something uncannily static about the man that frightened on-lookers, they later reported.

Eventually, two store managers approached the man, moving around him, so the story went, as if he might be booby-trapped.

Then one of them reached out and touched Masters's outstretched arm, and quickly withdrew his hand. Masters was cold, freezing cold. Other, braver souls approached, reached out, were amazed.

Then a particularly brazen youth pushed Masters in the chest, and he toppled.

The small crowd that had gathered by then sprang back, as if expecting the fallen man to shatter. Apparently he went down like a shop-window dummy, maintaining his rigid, standing posture with his arm outstretched even when lying in the aisle.

He was taken away in an ambulance and admitted to the nearest general hospital, where he was thoroughly examined. It seemed that the Frozen Man, as he soon came to be known, was not actually frozen at all. He was coated in a substance impervious to probes, hard, almost chitinous – and unknown to modern science. He was still alive – CAT scans showed evidence of neural activity – but the medics could do nothing to revive him.

Timothy Masters had been no one special, until then. A gardener who worked on Lord Dudley's Shropshire estate. Single, 30, with no relatives or family.

The story soon made the national news, and then was picked up by the international agencies. Timothy Masters's singular condition was something of a nine-day wonder. But as time wore on, and he remained in his rigid, frozen position, media interest waned.

He remained in a private hospital for the next year, monitored by specialists and dusted down by the daily staff from time to time.

And then he came round. One morning two weeks ago a cleaner saw him move his hand, as if withdrawing it

from the shelf he'd reached towards almost a year ago.

The woman had screamed and fled the room.

Media interest was intense again, with every journalist in the country, and beyond, wanting in on the story.

And Masters, for some unknown reason, had told his representative that he wished to see me, and only me.

I had never met Masters. Until he froze, I had never heard of him. I was not related to him, even distantly. My journalistic work cannot have been known to him. There was absolutely no reason why Masters should want to see me.

So naturally I was apprehensive, and intrigued, and bemused, as I hesitantly approached him in the ornamental garden of Dudley manor.

He turned as I crunched gravel. He smiled and gestured to the place next to him on the bench. "Amy, it's good to see you. Please, sit down."

I sat, quickly. How to describe my reaction to this perfect stranger?

He was dark, rather ordinary-looking, with kind eyes and a calm, reassuring smile. He radiated peace and a gentleness I associated more with Buddhist monks.

He was watching me intently, and tears appeared in his eyes and slipped down his cheeks.

I let out a breath and laughed. "I don't understand. This is ridiculous. I've never met you before in my life. I don't know you from Adam!" I think I was a little hysterical, and at the same time excited.

I had always assumed love at first sight to be some retroactive illusion suffered by incurable romantics...

I looked at him. "What do you want?"

He reached out and took my hand. His own hand was warm. I felt not in the least threatened by his sudden intimacy: it seemed entirely natural.

"Amy, what do you believe?"

I let out a breath. I can't claim to have been expecting any particular question, but this one had me stumped.

"I... Well – I don't quite know..." I stared into his eyes. Blue, gentle, compassionate.

I shrugged and said, "I'm not religious. I suppose you could call me a wishy-washy liberal humanist." I laughed. "I give money to Greenpeace, but I'm not a member of any political party."

He squeezed my fingers. "We don't know anything," he said, with a quiet authority that silenced me. "Oh, we think we do. We take in the world and make our assumptions and listen to the experts and form views and opinions, but it's all really so much conjecture. I mean, consider the world-view of a goldfish in a pond." He pointed towards the bulbous koi mooning around in the water before us. "What do they know?"

"I'm sorry... I don't understand."

He smiled. "I'll tell you," he said.

"Why me?" he said. "I was no one special, the head gardener at Dudley. I'd studied horticulture and land-management at Pershore, and worked for Lord Dudley for the past nine years. Then one day in Sainsbury's I reached out and..."

"What happened?"

"I thought I'd died. I felt an intense heat all over my body. I thought I'd had a heart attack and gone to... well, I thought I was in Heaven. At first. There was no pain, just a wonderful sense of peacefulness. I was surrounded by a golden light, and yet I had the feeling that I'd travelled a long, long way. Then I looked around and saw *them*, and I panicked. I experienced terror, a fear I had never known before..." He stopped, his gaze distant.

I had to prompt him. "Them?" I asked.

"The beings," he said. "They were all around me, examining me. I was naked."

"Beings?" I echoed. "Alien beings?" A shiver passed down my spine.

"Not aliens. Humans. But humans vastly different from you or me. I was in what looked like a park. I stood in a glade, and all around me were these... beings. I panicked. I lashed out, yelling. Then one of the creatures reached out and touched me, and I lost consciousness.

"When I came round again, I was lying on a padded surface under a silver awning, a kind of pavilion overlooking the glade. There were fewer of the creatures watching me.

"They told me not to fear them. Except... they didn't talk to me. I heard words in my head. They told me that, for a time, they had feared for my health, so severe had my reaction been to the transference."

"The transference?" I echoed.

"That's what they called it. They were slight creatures, with larger heads than you or me, and tiny features. I asked who they were, and they told me."

He stopped. He turned his head to look at me, and something in his eyes, a kind of burning veracity, told me that he, at least, believed the truth of what he had experienced.

He went on. "They said that two million years had elapsed since my time, and that they were our descendants." He smiled. "And I accepted that. I believed them. It seemed so obvious. They reassured me that I would come to no harm, and that they would return me, in time."

"They wanted to study you?" I asked.

What did I believe? Did I truly think that evolved humans had plucked Timothy Masters from the 21st century and whisked him two million years through time, in order to study him? I don't honestly know.

He went on, "I asked them what they wanted with me, why they had brought me there. They said they were scientists, and wanted to observe me. They were curious about their ancestors. They wanted to know how I worked, how I reacted to stimuli. They told me that I would remain here for a time, but that I would not be alone. They said they would provide me with someone whom I could love." He stopped and looked at me.

I think I knew, then, what was coming next.

He said, "I received the impression that their kind no longer loved, that perhaps it was no longer a biological necessity of the people of the far future. They said that they were affecting the transference of a woman, and that when I awoke I would no longer be alone. One of their number reached out to touch me, and I lost consciousness."

He squeezed my fingers. "And when I came awake

again, you were standing on the grass beneath the silver awning, watching me."

I was prepared, as I said. I knew what had been coming. It made a kind of crazy sense – the reason he had summoned me here.

But I shook my head. "Impossible!"

"The beings were no longer visible," Masters went on, "though I sensed their presence. I stepped forward and embraced you. It was as if... as if I had been waiting all my life for this moment. It was right, we belonged. We fitted. However, at the same time, I knew that the beings had manipulated this, that they had somehow brought about this attraction, this feeling of love that overwhelmed me."

I bridled. "And what about me?" I asked. "Did you consider my feelings at all?"

He smiled and squeezed my hand again. "As amazing as it seems, you felt the same."

I pulled my hand away. For a brief, crazy second it came to me that this was a set-up: I had been lured here against my will for some bizarre purpose... But how could that be? Had Masters staged his own freezing?

I said, "And I wasn't in the slightest fazed at being whisked two million years through time, to be accosted by a stranger? I wasn't terrified?"

He was shaking his head. "Of course not."

"Of course not?" I repeated, incredulous. "How can you say that?"

"Because," he said, "you knew where you were. And I was no stranger."

I was close to tears then. "I don't understand," I said.

"They were manipulating us," Masters said, "I knew that. I never again saw the beings while you and I were together, but I was always aware of their presence. We lived for years in a paradise. We ate fruit and drank from streams. We had no worries, and we were never bored, or concerned at what had happened to us. It was as if our past lives had been erased from our memories, as if we lived only for the day, and for each other. We were in love, and it was blissful."

I stared at him. "Years?" I said.

"So it seemed. We aged. We grew old. I came to understand what true love was, during that time. We grew old together, decrepit, but not once did my love for you diminish. We changed so incrementally over the years that I loved the old woman just as passionately as I had loved you when you first arrived."

I shook my head. The rationalist in me asked, "But we were there together? And yet you were frozen here while I wasn't..."

He smiled and touched my hand. "They transferred me first," he said. "I was an experiment, to see if they could accomplish the feat. Only then did they transfer you, from later in our own time."

"But why?" I asked. "Why not take me at the same time as they took you?" Then I was taken by the corollary of my acceptance of his story: at some point in the future, I too would undergo stasis, would freeze as the beings transferred me.

I tried to pull away, tell myself how preposterous all this was!

Masters said, "You died in that future age, Amy, and I grieved. The beings showed themselves again, and thanked me, and sent me back to warn you of what was to come. They did not want you to suffer the same terror that I had suffered. And of course, because you had come to me without fear, they knew I had returned successfully and met you here. A paradox of causality."

We sat in silence for a time. I removed my hand from his. I stared around the garden, at the fish in the pond. I was surrounded by normality, by the everyday we take for granted. I willed myself to disbelieve his story.

I turned to face him. "And," I said, "you expect me to believe everything you've said?"

He smiled. "I can convince you, Amy. You see, you told me all about yourself. I know your every secret."

I felt so terribly vulnerable, then. How dare this stranger claim such intimacy, on the pretext of such a bizarre story?

"You told me about your unhappy childhood, Amy. About the bullies. Your mother's death when you were 13, your father's depression. You told me about what happened when you were 25 –"

"Stop!"

"– what your lover did to you. You told me that you had never loved anyone since that time, never trusted anyone enough to love."

"Please stop," I begged.

He stopped, and held me. "Now do you believe?"

I asked at last. "Why us?"

"Why not us?" he said. "It had to be someone."

"What now?"

He touched my cheek. "You told me it was the day after you met me here, Amy. You returned home this afternoon, tried to finish your article." He laughed. "But you couldn't, of course. Then, in the morning, tomorrow at nine, after a sleepless night, you felt the heat, and you were transferred."

We stood, and held each other for a long, long time.

When I next looked at him, I saw that he was weeping. "Timothy?"

"You died up there," he said, "in the future. I watched you die, and I grieved. Then the beings sent me back." He sighed and stared at me. "I'm doing this for the *me* who was transferred, the person in the future. But do you realize how hard it is for the *me* of now, knowing that I might never again see you?"

I struggled for words. "But they sent you back..." I began. "Why not me?"

He shook his head, avoiding my eyes. "But I saw you *die* up there," he said.

I held him for a long time, and then I fled.

I returned to my flat, ignoring all the reporters encamped in the street. The phone rang continually. I turned down offers from three national papers for my story.

I raged. I wept for the life I had lost, however inade-

quate that life had been. I wept for my uncertain future.

I think I went a little mad.

I thought of the wasted years, and asked myself, again and again, how Masters might have known about what had happened on the night of my 25th birthday, when what should have been so good had turned so bad. Had I really told Masters, two million years into the future?

The idea was preposterous, of course. My sanity demanded that I disbelieve him.

I spent a sleepless night, just as he had said I would, and tried to come up with a rational explanation to account for the previous afternoon.

In the morning, approaching nine, I considered my life to date, the fear and unhappiness.

I stared at my old alarm clock on the bedside cabinet, not knowing what I wanted.

Nine o'clock came and went, and I was torn with relief, and at the same time a savage disappointment.

I stood and moved towards the bathroom.

And froze.

Froze.

Unable to move.

And then I felt the heat.

I stood beneath the silver awning, and he reached out for me, and we came together.

We lived a life as he had described it, our thoughts and sensations manipulated no doubt by the observing far-future humans: like insects under glass, like koi carp in a pond, but no less happy for that fact.

I came to know Timothy as I had known no other as we aged together in paradise.

I told him about our meeting in the grounds of Dudley Hall, of which of course he had no memory. I told him that I had fallen in love with him then, against my better judgement. Was ours the strangest union of two humans, ever?

And much later I died. I recall his tortured expression as sleep claimed me, and I slipped away.

And came awake again in my own age, approximately a year after my departure.

I was in a room in Dudley manor, a sunlit room overlooking the ornamental gardens. I was quite alone, and felt a moment's panic at the fact of Timothy's absence. For so long we had been together.

I slipped out of bed and hurried to the window and stared out, and there he was, standing in the garden below.

He was staring at the fish in the pond.

He turned, as if sensing my surveillance, then smiled and waved and moved towards the house.

Eric Brown's last several stories here were "The Children of Winter" (issue 163; winner of the British SF Association Award as best short story of 2001), "Ascent of Man" (issue 167), "The Frankenberg Process" (issue 171), the novella "The Blue Portal" (two parts, issues 180-181) and "The Wisdom of the Dead" (issue 186). An *Interzone* discovery (class of 1987), he lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire.

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

Daniel Kaysen

PART ONE

I'm lost in a world of my own, washing the dishes and thinking about the past, when Beth shouts a warning from upstairs.

Her shout makes me jump just as I'm putting my hands in the dishwater. My finger catches the blade of our sharpest knife. I look down as a small patch of clear water begins to swirl crimson.

Beth shouts again.

I look out of the window and see what she's seen.

It's him. It's him, again. God help us.

I'd told them all: "You see *him* coming, I want to know about it. The last thing this family needs is a surprise. Understand?"

They nodded.

"And first to shout gets a prize."

"I want a prize," Billy said. He's the baby. Turned six, this September.

"You have to shout first, Billy," said Beth. "Then you get the prize."

"This is stupid." That was Jenny. She's eldest, 16, and thinks she knows everything there is to know about anything.

"This is not stupid. This is called saving your Little-Miss skin. So you better watch for him."

But it was a waste of breath. Jenny never watched. And she never shouted. Not once.

And Billy was too young.

So it was only Beth, ever.

And here he is, again.

For a few seconds the air shimmered red in the yard, and then the guidance counsellor was striding out of the haze, towards the house.

"Now what?" I said to myself, drying my hands, and wrapping my finger in a plaster. "Now what?"

He walked right in. They don't knock. They don't wait. They just come in, as though they own the whole deal.

Of course, they *do* own the whole deal. But that's even more reason why they should wait a moment and knock, in my opinion.

"Mrs Caulson."

"Yes?" I said, as if he was interrupting something important I was doing. Not that I'm ever doing something he'd think of as important. No, all I do is raise my three children on my own, the best I can, and no thanks to him for all the extra trouble he brings.

"How are your family?"

"Right on course," I said.

"Good. This location has a lot of promise. You've got some good through-lines."

He meant my children. He meant I had good children.

"I do my best."

"But the owners have changed the Ark. We need to make some adjustments."

I wanted to cry when I heard that, I really did. I could

feel it, rising. But my mother had told me: "Never show them defeat. Never. Just say: 'And?'"

When the fences went up when I was a little girl, that's when she taught me: never show them defeat.

"And?" I said to the guidance counsellor, just like my mother had told me to.

"It's Billy. The Ark needs him to change."

The Ark. It's always the Ark.

I know the story of the Ark, because I read it once in a bible. We're not meant to have bibles any more, or talk about them even. But my sister's husband wrote some of it down, from what his father remembered, and I read that, once, at night, quickly.

In the story a man named Noah – this is a long time ago but he was definitely called Noah – was told they were cancelling his sector. Then they told him to build a boat – the Ark, they called it – and on that boat he had to put two of every animal he could find. I always thought that bit about the animals was kind of sweet, but it must have been noisy. Especially at night.

Anyway, he didn't argue and he built the boat and put his family and animals on it.

Then, when the cancellation came, they lifted the boat – the Ark – and set it down again in another sector, and Noah and his family were saved. They were like seeds, I thought. Seeds of a new little world of their own.

The version I read wasn't complete. It didn't say what happened after, or why the cancellation happened in the first place. Or why a boat from a long time ago meant *my* family had to keep changing. But that's life, I guess. You never know enough and you can't ask the counsellors because they never tell you the reason why, not about anything. They just shimmer out of the haze and tell you their adjustments and then they go. As if it's nothing.

"Billy," I stopped him, as he ran into the kitchen.

"I'm busy."

"You're six, what are you so busy with?"

"I just am," he said.

"Listen, this is important. Very important."

"Am I in trouble?"

That's what Billy was always like. Insecure, I guess.

"No Billy, you're not in any trouble. I just need to talk to you about a special thing."

What I should have said was: yes, you are in a world of trouble. If I was you I would start drinking now, to get over all the pain you're going to grow into.

Instead I said: "Remember Daddy?"

Billy shakes his head.

I tell him: "Daddy loved you very much and he smelled of petrol and he had a tattoo right here, on his arm. You remember? A heart with an arrow through it?"

Billy doesn't remember.

"He bought you Tiger."

"He did?"

It's not really true. His daddy didn't buy him Tiger. I made him myself from scraps I sewed together. But sometimes a little white lie is for the best.

"Yes, Daddy bought you Tiger. That's how much he

loved you. But you know, sometimes good people have bad things happen to them, and your Daddy was one of those good people who had a bad thing happen to him."

"What?" says Billy. "What bad thing?"

I don't tell him this, but God's truth is that Billy's father died on the fence, along with my sister's husband and Marty's eldest.

There was a story going round that when the fifth moon was new you could get through the fences. They said the fifth moon was a power generator, and the power was weakest when the moon was thinnest. Sure, you'd get a burn or two, but you could make it through and try to find the rebels in the next sector.

Everyone figured there were rebels in the next sector just out of reach, with guns and plans and hopes and whisky and brave songs.

Well, that rebels stuff sounded like nonsense to me. The next sector looked the same as ours: just a few families going about the business of living as best they could.

And the fence story was worse than nonsense, even I knew that. But stories get bigger than sense, when people get desperate. So my husband and my sister's husband and Marty's eldest got themselves killed trying to get through, the night the fifth moon was new.

None of us dared go near enough the fence to even cover the corpses, so the dead lay there on the charred grass, in the fence's shadow. The crows picked them clean.

Marty went and sat vigil for them, 20 yards from the fence, following their skulls' gaze up to the sky, as if she was trying to make out what they were looking at.

Counsellor didn't like that, at all. Marty got cancelled by the end of the week. She died right there in the yard in that green haze that kills a person before they can scream.

We never saw Marty's surviving kids again. The counsellor told us they got lifted to another sector, to some place that needed new children.

Well, it was a comfort to some.

All I know is that Billy's father lies in a pile of fool bones, by the fence.

But that's not the story the counsellor wants Billy to hear. That's not the adjust. So I tell my son the adjust, like a good mother should.

"Your Daddy was murdered by a bad man, a bad man with a scar right down his cheek," I tell Billy. "You don't remember, but that's what happened. You're old enough to know now."

Billy doesn't move. He just looks at me, trying to believe.

"The man who killed your Daddy had a son. The son has a scar too, right down his cheek, just like his father did. And ever since your Daddy died you wanted to grow up and kill that son. That's your secret wish. You're going to kill him."

There, kid. That's your adjustment.

Hope you liked your childhood.

That night I lie in bed and ask myself if I've gone too far yet.

There's time still for Billy – the Ark might change again, and then he won't have to kill any man's son, with

or without a scar.

But right now – or soon – there's going to be a boy with a new scar on his face, somewhere in one of the sectors, and his mother will tell him of that time he doesn't remember, when his father killed a man with a tattoo on his arm, who smelled of petrol. And the mother will tell her son that one day he has to kill the tattooed man's son in turn.

That little boy – or maybe he's almost a man, already, or maybe he's sort of in between – his eyes will go wide, and he won't quite believe it, but if he knows what's good for him he'll try to believe it so hard that it becomes true, for him, in his heart. And then my Billy will be a marked man and one day they'll meet and...

But, no. Like I say, maybe the Ark will change.

Besides, what am I meant to say if I don't like an adjust? Am I meant to tell the counsellor *no*, just like that?

The counsellor would say: "The owners are very happy with the through-lines, they just want this one small adjustment. Please. It's for the best."

I know what my mother would tell me to do. She'd say: Play the cards you're dealt.

And she would shake her head and walk off, and later I'd hear her start singing that song, from Church. The words, the ones I could understand, sounded full of hope, but she sang the song sad.

She said, once, that Church was a building in the old town, before I was born. But she didn't say much more.

No one talked about what was before, really.

"It's their world, now," said my mother, "and we better get as comfortable as we can."

The next day I tell Jenny about Billy's adjust.

"Great," she says, sarcastic. It's her one tone of voice.

But instead of stomping out of the room like she normally does, she lingers, looking at the floor.

Something's coming. She wants to say something, I know the signs. And I know it's not good news. It's never been good news, ever. If Jenny waits to say something, then there's somebody somewhere going to start wishing they'd never had kids.

"Go on. What is it? Break my heart."

"I'm pregnant."

I tell you, that one I hadn't expected. I hadn't expected it to be *that* bad. But before I can even think of a word to say, Beth shouts a warning from upstairs, and I put my fingers to my lips, to hush Jenny.

She shakes her head and walks out of the room.

It all makes sense, though. I mean, of *course* she was pregnant. She always wanted to be a star, always wanted attention.

Some boy would have given her promises of taking her away, to the bright lights and the world beyond this sector. And wasn't tonight so perfect? Didn't she feel the heat in the air between them? Had anyone told her she had the most beautiful body he'd ever seen?

Or maybe he just said: Let's do it in the rusted car. There's not a whole lot of poetry round here.

"Yes?" I say, as the counsellor walks in. His face is usually blank, but I see at once he knows our news, and he

can't believe it.

"Did you know Jenny was pregnant by her cousin?"

Her cousin?

"Yes," I lied. Never show defeat. Never show surprise. "And?"

"I've been up half the night working on adjusts, major adjusts, to try to save the Ark. This development throws the balance all off. Beth's going to have to more weight, to even it all up. I think she develops some compulsive disorder. She starts cutting people's faces, maybe, having seen her father's killer. She starts with some self-harm, of course. But this is all speculation. I'll have to test it first. Crossovers are hard to get right."

He wasn't talking to me any more. He was just thinking out loud. Then he blinked and looked at me again.

"Do you know how many Arks I'm managing?"

"I don't care," I say. "I don't care how many Arks you're managing."

"I'll be back. You might want to tell your children there's changes on the way. Big changes."

He went, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

Jenny was gone. Billy was playing out of sight. So I went upstairs, heart heavier than ever.

I knocked on Beth's door, the way she'd trained me to.

"Go away!" she shouted.

I went in anyway.

She was pretending to read her book.

I sat down on her bed.

"You're worse than him. You do what he says," she said, straight away.

"It's for the best," I say. "You'll understand when you're older."

"It's not for the best. And I can't cut myself or anyone else, I'm sorry."

She went back to her book. I should have been angry at her, for listening in.

Instead I said: "So we're going to get cancelled, is that it? You want to be the one watching as they take the family away? You want Billy taken who knows where?"

"I just won't do it."

"I'm supposed to just tell the counsellor that? Next time he comes?"

"And you never gave me a prize. I'm not watching out any more. Let Billy or Jenny watch from now on."

"So you're just going to read that book till they come and cancel us all?"

"Yes. Goodbye."

"Beth, maybe your adjustment won't be cutting yourself. Maybe the adjustment will be happier."

"The adjustments are never happier."

"Well, it might change. Maybe you'll have a boyfriend! That would be good, wouldn't it?"

"Who'd want a boyfriend from round here?" she said quietly.

And she put her head down, as though she was reading again. Like I couldn't see the tears.

I know I was meant to say something comforting then, but I was clean out of comfort. I was out of everything, really. Jenny's news, Billy's change, it was like one of

those storms that start bad and you know are going to get worse, much worse, before they're done. Hard to find comfort words when the flood's coming.

So I just moved up so I was next to her and held her until the worst of her crying was over, and then I closed the curtains, switched off the light, and she went to sleep. "Goodnight," I whispered. Goodnight.

Just the three of us ate that evening, Billy, Jenny and me. No one talked.

After, I left the dishes on the table and walked into the yard and sat on the tree stump, looking up at the house, waiting for the lights in the children's rooms to go out. First Billy's, early. Then Jenny's, finally.

I sat under the moons for an hour more. I thought of the good times that I could remember. I thought about Noah. I thought about what Beth had said: where are the happy adjustments? Why does the counsellor never bring good news? Just food and supplies once a week, and nothing but grief for the rest of the time. Why doesn't he bring hope?

But my mother told me hope was only to be found at the Church, in the old town.

And now there were fences and you couldn't get there, not now.

Then again, what would I do if I could get there? Church can't stop you from dying. Church couldn't stop them from killing my mother. A counsellor came and asked her some questions and didn't like the answers he got.

We were only small, me and my sister, but they killed my mother anyway. Green light and she was gone and there we were, me and my sister, left to cope alone. We did cope, best we could. They left food and supplies, we got by.

But mine wouldn't cope. Beth quit today, anyone could see that. Jenny's due to be a mother but she's still a child herself, really. And I can imagine Billy, motherless, talking to Tiger, telling him it's going to be fine and even Tiger, stuffed rags that he is, wouldn't be stupid enough to believe it.

Tiger would look back with that mournful expression he has. I didn't mean it to turn out that way but it did. His face looks like he knows that whatever's coming is always going to be worse, and is always, somehow, going to involve pain and loss and grief.

He looks like he understands exactly what Beth was saying about the counsellors, about the Ark, about the changes, always for the worse.

He looks like he knows. That's what he looks like.

It never occurred to me until now that it might always be for the worse.

It never occurred to me to say *no*.

But now, all at once, I see that I have to.

And I see the way to do it.

When I'm sure the house is quiet I scrape the earth off the trapdoor in the yard, and heave out the six cans of petrol my husband buried there, before he died.

"If something happens to me, give these to the rebels when they come," he told me.

But there are no rebels. So I carry them one by one to the house and set them on the kitchen table.

Just looking at them reminds me of him. I think to myself: I wish he was here now. *He* would know how to do this, how to cancel a whole family.

He was the sort of man who knew things like that.

I know nothing about this.

Where should I pour it in the house? When should I light it?

What if one of the children wakes up before it's all over?

There is a noise and I look up from my thoughts.

Beth is standing in the kitchen doorway, hand in hand with Billy. They are both fully dressed, they even have coats on. "I'm taking Billy out," she says. "You do what you want, we're going for a midnight walk."

I can think of nothing to say. I can think of nothing to feel.

"And when we've gone there's no point burning anything. Jenny's gone to her cousin's. They're running for the border in his car."

"There's fences at the border."

"She said she was going to get through them. She said it was the fifth moon."

Something wrung at me inside.

Beth just stands there, waiting to go.

"Where are you taking Billy?"

"I'm going to show him the fence, show him where his father died. See if we can get through. Fifth moon's nearly new, after all."

And when I look at her I see she's different.

Her look is defiant, and defeated, and full of tears.

She knows exactly what's going to happen to her, at the fence.

"You can come too, Mother, if you like. C'mon, Billy, let's go see the fence."

"But I have to kill a man with a car on his face," Billy says, troubled.

"No you don't," Beth tells him. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. Now say goodnight."

"G'night," says Billy, to me.

"Goodnight," I say.

They walk out of the door. I'm paralysed.

Goodnight, I whisper after them. Goodnight.

I sit on the tree stump in the yard for the longest time, until it gets too cold and I decide to go inside again.

As I stand up there is a cough, near me, in the darkness.

"Mrs Caulson?"

I didn't see a red haze but it is the man, the guidance counsellor. Beth would have seen him and shouted, but Beth is gone. I wonder how long he's been there.

"Can you spare a moment?"

My children are dead. I want to laugh. Yes, I can spare a moment.

"What?" I say.

"We'd like you to sign these."

He has papers, on a clipboard.

"What are they?"

"Release forms."

My children are dead. He wants me to sign papers. I

want to laugh.

"You know what you can do with them, if you don't mind me saying. You and your Ark. You and your adjust. My children are dead."

"Your children are safe, they are with us Mrs Caulson."

My children are dead. I want to laugh. He tells me they are safe but of course they are not.

"Can I see them, then?"

"Yes, you can, if you sign these papers. Release forms."

"I don't know what they are."

"I'll explain them to you. Perhaps we could step inside, Mrs Caulson? I can assure you your children are safe."

"My children are dead."

"Please, Mrs Caulson, come inside. It's cold out here. Besides, I'd like to show you the family bible."

I never saw a proper bible. And it is cold outside.

I go inside, expecting to see a book with stories in, stories like Noah.

But what he shows me isn't like that.

It is a large binder. It has photos of my family. It is like a diary of all of us. Funny, there are crossings-out in places. All the things that are crossed-out were things that never happened. It is like a diary written in advance, I guess.

It has photos of us all. I wonder if I look as bad in real life as I do in my photo. There's a nice one of Billy, though. And my husband. I touch his photo.

"You killed my husband," I said.

"We – he made the wrong decision."

"You didn't stop him."

"We cannot intervene."

I laughed.

"We are not interventionist in that sense. The Ark was leading him towards an escape attempt."

"Which you knew would kill him."

"Yes," he said.

"You killed my husband."

He passes me the papers.

"He is safe too, Mrs Caulson. You can see him again."

My husband is dead. My children are dead.

They are safe.

I can see them again.

I want to laugh.

"So what's a release form?"

"You release us from any legal responsibility. For any pain or suffering, physical or mental or emotional, that you or your family suffered taking part in the show –"

"The *what*?"

"You'll understand later."

When I'm older.

"– or any post-traumatic stress disorders."

"Is this an adjust?"

"Yes. Yes, in a way. Things will be different for you after this. You're going to a new show."

"A new what?"

"Your family are there already. They're safe with us."

"In a new sector?"

"Yes."

"With the rebels?"

"Yes, you could put it like that."

The rebels.

And I'd always thought the talk of rebels was nonsense.

I signed the papers.

"Now what?" I said.

"Watch."

I watched as the familiar crimson glow took hold around him. But this time, instead of merely hugging him, it spiralled out, it bloomed, like a flower, like blood in water.

It spiralled out, into the air. Tendrils. Smoke. I watched it reaching out to envelop me.

It was the strangest sight.

My mother once said something about *heaven*. She whispered it to me. She said it's where the good go when they die.

She said that all wrongs are righted there.

She pointed upwards. It is up in the sky.

Nobody dies in heaven, she said.

She told me she believed in heaven with all her heart and all her soul.

That was good enough for me.

Anywhere where no one dies is good enough for me.

As the smoke began to take me over I expected to feel different. But nothing felt different inside, apart from the cold, that is. The cold of the night. The cold of the shocks I had been through.

That's all it was.

Darkness always feels cold.

"Ready, Mrs Caulson? Ready to go to the next sector?"

"Yes," I said, trying to be brave. "But is it better than here? Are there fences?"

"There *are* fences in the new sectors, but they're to stop the viewers getting in."

"The what?"

"The viewers. They can be violent."

"Does anybody die in this new sector?"

"No, Mrs Caulson. Not in the sector you're going to. I can promise you that nobody dies there, ever."

That's what my mother said about heaven.

I hug my arms around myself, against the cold.

"Here, Mrs Caulson, take my hand. Trust me, I live there too, where you are going. I was cut, just like you've been."

"Cut?"

"Yes. But come on."

My children are safe.

I want to laugh.

I am going to heaven.

I will see my husband, and Jenny, Billy, Beth.

The fences there are to keep the others out.

I take his hand.

The smoke is red, like glory.

And two by two, the animals went in.

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

PART TWO

1. Production

"Jenny, I've got your niece for you, line two."

There's a lot of quick changes of focus, in this job. You've got twelve locations with several screens each and you have to be able to cut between different scenes and different stories.

And you've also got to be able to switch away from the screens altogether, and cut to family.

"Thanks, Mitch."

I pick up.

"Hey, Rachel," I say, as I look at the four feeds we've got from the location we're working on, marking feed two as a possible for the extended highlights disc.

"Hey, Jenny," Rachel says. Sometimes she calls me Aunt Jenny, but it sounds wrong to both of us, seeing as how me and my sister don't really get along.

Of course, I still see my sister around. Sometimes, when I'm in a production meeting, I'll see Beth walking down the corridor, smart jacket and hairclips, talking with senior-management types. Once or twice I've even seen her talking with the head of the division, Gordon Harper. He even looked like he was listening to her opinion.

"Hang on, Rachel – Mitch, have we got *nothing* o/b here?"

Rachel waits as I get my answer: no, the three o/bs are all dustfucked.

Well, that figures. Nothing gets repaired quickly. Nothing gets maintained. They're cheap, the owners, and it's a lousy system, but we're professionals. We make do.

"Mitch, we better pray the bust-up's indoor only."

The family onscreen are about to eat, taking their places at the table. One of them's got an announcement for the others – a revelation – but it looks like it's still a few minutes away.

"Okay hon, I'm back. So how'd the audition go?"

Rachel's just turned 13. Stars in her eyes.

"Okay," she says, "I think."

"Hey, that's great."

"But I don't want to get too excited."

I can hear her trying to damp down hope.

The family at the table are starting their argument and I'm checking the sound levels, checking for language content, checking nothing goes *off-topic*. That means we have to cut all mentions of the counsellors, and their

entrances and exits. We cut the hazes, and the adjusts. We cut all mentions of the fences, too. No one gets burned, in our shows. Officially they die, off-screen, in car crashes. No one sees the bodies. No one sees the crows.

All anyone sees is the cast, lost in their own little worlds.

I listen as Rachel chatters on about how the audition went.

On screen the revelation starts. The family get passionate about it, really passionate. They don't know it's only a minor subplot, no more than a paragraph in the show's bible.

But location is a different world, I remind myself.

You get caught up in things there.

I came to production when I was 16. We'd had this thing together, me and my cousin. This affair, I guess. I know, but who was to tell me it wasn't a great idea? No one even told me he wasn't cute.

All I knew was that being round him was better than being round my family. And when he said *let's do it in the rusted car* I figured why not?

I had this pregnancy.

The night I told him about it he put some holes in the walls with his fist.

I guess I kind of lost it when he did that.

He tried to make it up to me by telling me he'd take me away from all this, because he knew that escape was all I really wanted. So that night we drove for the border, where the fences are.

There was a story that when the fifth moon was new the power was at its lowest and you could get through the fences alive.

The fifth moon was new that night, so we drove for the fence at full speed.

A flash of red, when we hit.

I must have hit my head because I saw something, a hallucination I guess, of crowds of people, more people than you could even imagine, in a red place, caged in by red fences. A bad feel to the place. A very bad feel. I still don't like thinking about it.

And then I woke up.

And everything was different. Completely different. At least compared to what I was used to back then.

I'd never even seen carpet.

I'm in a big room full of carpets and glass and desks, with

three other dustfucked kids like me.

A woman with a clipboard says: You must be Jenny? She's smiling, but you can tell she doesn't really mean it. It's just her job. It's just a professional smile.

I make the mistake of looking out of the window. I scream. We're so high up, and what the *fuck* is everything made of? Black glass was new to me. I figured I was on a moon.

Then I catch sight of the cars, way down below, and I can at least recognize them as cars, and I figure it's Earth after all, but not any sector I ever heard of.

I sit back down and try to breathe and tell myself that suddenly pregnancy doesn't seem so huge.

We are given some tests. I pass them. I'm to become a production trainee, clipboard-woman tells me.

"You wouldn't know what a production-trainee is," she tells me.

"Is it something to do with being pregnant?" I say.

She makes a note on my form. "Not for long, Jenny."

I wake up in the medic room and they tell me I am no longer pregnant.

I don't really think about it any more, but it's why I look out for Rachel.

Mitch is gesturing, urgently. I tell Rachel I'll give her a call later in the day.

"What do you want to do with the grandfather?" he says. I look at the screens – the grandfather is heading out the door, towards the hall.

"Go H1," I tell Mitch. "Just in case."

We go H1, and one of the screens now shows him stalking down the hall, muttering. I turn up the volume. He's muttering stuff about the owners.

Mitch presses cut on the feed, and it's like it never happened.

2. Location

Something's gone wrong.

At first I thought that maybe I made it through the audition after all. They say that if you get through the audition then they don't give you any warning, they just transfer you to the studio and you're meeting all these stars you've seen from the holos and it's a whole new world. You don't even get a chance to pack or to say good-bye to your friends. Just boom and you're in Hollywood and there's trailers and make-up and everything.

But wherever this is, it's not Hollywood.

It's fucked, wherever it is.

I'm in a *yard*, like you see on the shows. I can even see a fence, a way off.

There's a tree stump and there's a trap door, open, but covered by dust as if it's been that way for years.

It's very quiet and I don't like it.

But, you know, that's show-business. They throw things at you, tests, like this. To see if you keep smiling. I figure I made it through the audition and this is the first stage of training. I guess I got a part in some action holo, and they transferred me here for some action training. I figure some guy's going to come by and make me

do push-ups and sit-ups and stuff.

If I'd known I was coming here I would have practised. But I didn't know. Just boom, and I'm transferred, and here I am.

Well, smile. You never know who's watching, after all. And then I turn round.

And *she's* there. And there's a man with her.

He's got this scar on his face, and either he spends forever in make-up each morning or it's real. I definitely don't recognize him from the holos or the shows, or sports.

Her, though, I recognize. I turn away.

"Rachel," she says.

"Mother."

"Listen," she says. "I need you to listen. Look at me." I turn round again.

"Who's he?" I say. "Is this about the audition? Because if I've been chosen I didn't think it was going to be like this."

I thought there were going to be trailers and make-up. Stars, lights, fame.

This is so not how was it meant to be.

"No one thought it was going to be like this," she says.

I can feel something rising in me, crying. I so don't want to cry. Not in front of her. Not in front of him, whoever he is.

"Smile, Rachel," says my mother. "You're on camera."

"On *what*?" says the man.

We sit in the kitchen of the house.

"You grew up *here*?" I say to her. It's hard to believe.

"Yes. My old room's upstairs. Your grandmother used to stand right there at the window, watching the dust go by. Humming songs she didn't know the words to. You saw the roof? Well, your Aunt Jenny used to climb over that at night, so she could go socializing."

"Who'd she socialize with at night?"

"Me," said the man. It was the first question he'd understood. Everything else was going way over his head.

"Rachel, this is your cousin once removed."

"Hi," he says, and I feel uncomfortable, trying not to look at his scar.

But he's family.

And there's cameras.

So I smile, best I can.

But it's so not what I expected.

There's whisky, and guns. On the table.

"What's the guns for?" I say.

Scar guy knows the answer to that one. "Guns are for stopping the people you don't want coming round from coming round," he says.

"I thought they were illegal."

"Apparently not on this show," says Beth.

"This *what*?"

I tell myself maybe he was really cute when he was younger, but now I can't see what Jenny saw in him at all.

"This *what*?" says the guy again.

My mother just shakes her head so I try to explain the idea of shows to him.

Explaining's hard work, though.

"See," I tell him, "this is all on camera, we are all on camera, and people watch us. It's meant to be called Assisted Fiction, that's its proper name, but everyone calls it Reality. Reality's one of the three Planet Management entertainment divisions, like holos and sports. Jenny says that reality's best. Anyway, in reality there's also crossover stories and that's when –"

Before I even finish telling him about crossover stories, he interrupts me.

"I don't know anything about cameras or shows. All I know is they've given us guns, and guns are good. Means we can stop them interfering. Dead men don't come back. That's the one sure thing in life."

"You think you can pull the trigger?" That's my mother, trying not to be creeped out by this man.

"Yeah, sure I can pull the trigger. Doesn't matter if *you* can't do it, though," he says. "One person's enough. It's like God said: 'Two Shall Not Kill'."

"*Thou*," says my mother. "The word is *thou*. It's an old way of saying *you*."

"Beth, the word is *Two*. Two shall not kill. Look, it's written down in here."

He pulls a little book from his pocket. It's full of tiny handwriting.

"What's that?" I say.

"It's a bad copy of the holy word of God," says my mother.

"Gord? Gordon Harper?"

"*God*." They both say it, my mother and scarface.

"You're not making any sense," I tell them. "I'm going to have a shower."

"Bath," they both say.

"What, there's no *shower*?"

I try to tell myself to smile, but I'm not kidding anyone.

When I get upstairs there's something else wrong.

It feels like there's people there, in the corridor. It feels like people but I can't see them. It's really strong, like if I could close my eyes then I could touch them, that's what it feels like.

It's scary.

I so don't close my eyes. No way do I close my eyes.

When I get downstairs again they're arguing over a show I never heard of, and I thought I knew them all.

"It was a *servant*," he says. "The servant made Eve take the apple. Look, it's right here in writing."

My mother's got that look she gets when she knows everything and you know nothing. "*Serpent*, the word is serpent. You've got a bad copy. What's a servant doing there? There was only Adam and Eve. That's the whole point."

"You're the one with the bad copy, I'm telling you. The *servant* made her eat the apple. Satan, God's servant."

I give up trying to follow it and I go and stand at the window. I try to imagine my grandmother and then I try to imagine what this show's about and if there'll be dancing, because dancing's the thing I'm best at. That and singing.

I ask them: "Is there going to be singing?"

"Rebel songs," says scarface. "I figure we're the first rebels. The first real ones. They've given us whisky and guns, see? I think somebody up there likes us. We can

agree on that at least Beth. Somebody up there likes us."

"No," says my mother. "I really don't think they do."

3. Division Control

"You wanted to see me, Mr Harper?"

Yes Mitchell.

"What can I do for you?"

Do you want to administer a division?

"A division, sir? I thought only higher scale employees were given –"

I don't usually repeat myself. Do you want to administer a division?

"...Yes. Of course."

You know what it involves? You know that sometimes there'll be mass cancellations?

"Yes."

Do you think you could make those cancellations?

"Yes, I think so. I mean, certainly."

Good. You're now in charge of the reality division.

"Reality? All of it?"

...

"I mean, thank you Sir. And what are my orders?"

Cancel it.

"Sorry, Sir, cancel the...?"

The division.

"The whole *division*?"

I said something about not repeating myself.

"Given the cost, I'd like to just double-check the order.

You want me to cancel the whole division: people, buildings, equipment, everything?"

Yes.

"I'm assuming that's a red cancellation? Given the numbers of people in reality, and the expense."

This will be a green cancellation.

"Green. You want me to greenlight the reality division. I understand. I mean, I think I understand. It's just, you know... can I ask why?"

The other two divisions want to take us over, and I don't want them to. I don't like their management style.

"I see. Sort of. I expect it's complex, right?"

Do you have any more questions?

"One, Sir. When do you want me to do it?"

After I've gone. I'm going up to Five.

"And do I...?"

You stay here Mitchell. You stay here at the division. You are the captain of the ship, as it were.

There is grief.

Of course there is grief.

Mitchell was to marry Jenny, one of his assistants, in Production. And now he will not marry her.

Well, he should have learned that lesson sooner.

Consorting with those lower down the hierarchy, it's never a good idea.

There are always entanglements.

Best to be rid of them.

Though the best course of action is rarely the easiest, just as this current best course of action is not easy. Not for Mitchell.

Still, he does as he is told.

From Five I watch him as he executes the order, and reality is cancelled.

4. Five

"We should have moved against him sooner."

His fellow owner sighs.

Through the window below he can see the planet they are trying to manage.

War would be quicker, easier. But that is the trouble with wars. They are easy and quick.

The seduction of a planet is better and its effects last longer, down the generations.

"Yes. We should have moved sooner."

They wanted to take control from him, the third owner, they wanted his division but he has prevented them by destroying it. All of it. It is an outrage, against all decency.

"The expense! The dead! I mean, a whole *division*..."

"The manual does not specifically outlaw such action."

"The manual is unclear."

He is right. The subsections sometimes contradict each other and the translations are sometimes unsure. The owners keep asking for a better manual but it never comes.

So they do the best they can.

"The *spirit* of the manual says he shouldn't have done it."

"The letter of it says he can do what he wants. It was his division, after all."

"It's a corrupted text, and incomplete."

"All texts are corrupted. All manuals are incomplete."

It is the curse of their task.

"But he's unstable. He even consorts with the managed."

It is a grievous sin, consorting with the managed.

It unbalances nature, it breeds unpredictable offspring, it makes for intractable worlds.

In the past it has often led to the cancellation of whole planets.

They both look through the window, down at the planet.

Half the planet is dark, asleep.

"It's quiet, for the moment," trying to be optimistic.

"But how long will it last?"

"We can hope."

They have discovered that much of planetary management is waiting and hoping. It's not really as glamorous as the academy portrayed it. It's not really as glamorous as they had expected. But there is nothing else that can be done, for the moment.

So they go back to looking through the window at the planet below, which is half in darkness.

Quiet, asleep. For the moment.

5. Location

"Jenny, would you –"

Then, boom.

And suddenly I'm not talking to Mitch about the feed quality on H3. I'm here, instead.

That's how it happened.

It takes me a long time to adjust.

That night, Beth and I go and sit on the old tree-stump in the yard. She asks me why I'm looking so unhappy, as though unhappiness is an inconceivable reaction.

"Why? Well, one moment I'm at work and then boom, transfer, and suddenly I find myself *here* and it's all my worst nightmares. One moment I was looking forward to the weekend with Mitch and now this. Instead of my apartment and my fiancé and my stuff, I'm looking at nothing except dust and a shitload of really bad memories and I have absolutely no idea why I'm here. So excuse me if I'm not dancing with joy, okay?"

Beth's quiet then, a long time.

One of us has to break the silence.

"Beth, do *you* know why we're here?"

"Yes."

And she goes silent again. You have to prod her to get information out of her.

"So why are we here? Whose idea was it to bring us back?"

"It was my idea. I got Gordon – Gordon Harper – to write the order."

She's kidding, of course. Exaggerating. "Sure, you got Gordon Harper to write an order."

"I did."

"Right, of course." Sure. "And remind me why'd he listen to you?"

"We had a relationship, a long time ago."

That's what we in the trade call a show-stopper.

"You slept with *Gordon Harper*?"

"Rachel's his. He's the father."

Right. Of course.

Sure.

"Okay, look, say I believe you. Just tell me why. Why are we here? Why did you bring us *here*?"

"Because Gordon cancelled reality."

I can't begin to process that one.

"The reality division. He cancelled it. The whole division – production, network control, transmission, everything – was due to be cancelled this afternoon."

I'm trying not to listen. But I hear it. And I want to ask but I can't. She answers me anyway.

"Yes. Mitch, everyone. Gone. Greenlight."

"Mitch?"

"Yeah, Mitch."

"Mitch is dead?"

"They all are."

I want to laugh. It's very strange.

The trap door is open, I notice. We should close it. Rachel might fall in. Someone might fall in. Or might drop a match, or something. It smells of petrol. A match in there and it would be fire underground. Someone might fall in. The trapdoor is open, I notice. We should close it.

"Jenny?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry reality got cancelled. I tried to talk

him out of it, but you don't know him. He does things he thinks are for the best. His management style's different from that of the other owners. He's idealistic."

"But I guess he looks after his children," I say. He saved Rachel, after all. He rescued her mother and Aunt, too. A whole family, just for her. "Does he have lots of children?"

"Just three. Three daughters."

"Rachel and who else? Not ... not you and me?"

"No."

"But I never met mine, my father. Or yours"

"I read about us. I pulled the show's bible. Our show's bible. You, me, Billy, all had the same father. It wasn't Gordon Harper."

"So who was it?"

"Just a name. The rest of the page was a jump cut to something else."

"Bibles are always like that," I say.

Character detail is sometimes inconsistent. Through-lines jump around. Arcs begin too late or end too soon. Or rather, they used to.

If Beth is right then there are no shows, not now, no arcs. And no bibles, either.

We sit there, on the tree stump, as the night deepens and gets colder.

The cameras are dead. They died when the division was cancelled. Nobody's watching us. They used to say that the moons could see us, but I know that's not true. It was just the cameras, and now they're dead.

It is worse, much worse, when nobody is watching.

It gets too cold, finally, so we head back into the house. Before I close the door I look back at the sky. A moon is rising.

"That's Five," says Beth.

"Where the power's supposed to be," I say.

"Yeah," says Beth.

"That's just a story though," I say.

Beth says nothing.

I take one last look at the moon before I close the door.

"Beth, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know about you but I'm going to bed," she says.

"We'll think about it tomorrow. You could read this though, if you wanted to."

She gives me a book.

"Goodnight," I say, as she heads for the stairs.

"Goodnight."

Goodnight, goodnight.

It's very strange.

I want to laugh.

I don't.

6. The Dead Sector

Jenny sits long into the night, in candlelight, in shock.

Her cousin stays with her. Gun in hand, because he's on guard, because it's the only thing he can think to do.

He's a man and men are like that.

Jenny picks up the book Beth gave her and starts flick-

ing through it.

"What's that?" says her cousin.

Jenny looks at the cover. "It says it's *The Holy Bible*."

"I doubt it. I never saw one like that before."

"Nor me. All the bibles I ever saw have photos and cast information and adjusted arc projections. This is nothing like that."

"You've hung out with strange bibles, Jenny."

"I don't think I know this show," she says, reading bits at random.

Her cousin gets out his own handwritten copy. "We could compare, though," he says.

"Compare what?"

"My version and yours. Have you got Genesis in there?"

"Genesis?" she says, lost.

"It's in the beginning."

She turns to the front of the book, looks surprised. "Yes, there's something called Genesis. It's got numbers, too. Series numbers and episode numbers, I guess."

"Just turn to Genesis 6. Read it out loud."

She reads it, haltingly.

So much of it is new to her.

To me, as well.

I know more about Noah now.

It wasn't just Noah's sector they cancelled.

It was the whole world.

Imagine that.

Imagine all the people that weren't Noah, drowned and dead.

But, I think, they can't all have died. I bet some survived, clung on to trees or bits of wood, slipping through the death's net and surviving.

It's like washing dishes. You think you've done it all, you think you're done, but when you put everything away and pour the water out you find something else that has slipped through.

At least in my family you did.

Jenny is hazy, tires of the bible.

"Oh," she says. "Tiger! Look."

The cousin follows her gaze. "Right, that was Billy's. The kid carried that thing round *everywhere*."

Tiger, says Billy next to me.

That's right, Tiger, I say to him.

Jenny goes to pick him up.

"I don't like having stuff to remind me of my brother," she says. "I always tried to forget."

"We could bury him, maybe," says the cousin.

NOOOO! shouts Billy, at my side.

He's six. He's the baby of the family.

Rachel, earlier, sensed us.

Me and Billy. We were in the corridor upstairs when she came up. We were keeping out of the way, trying to work out what was going on, why we were suddenly back in the house, why *they* were suddenly in the house.

In broad daylight, Rachel felt me. She couldn't see me, but she felt me.

That was a first. Beth, her cousin, Jenny, they don't feel a thing of our presence.

Rachel felt us, though. In plain daylight. The two of us, me and Billy.

It's good, in a way.

But it's bad, in a way, too.

Rachel screams from upstairs now. "NOOOO!" It echoes through the boards of the house.

She tears down the darkened stairs.

She runs to Jenny. "You *mustn't!*"

It is what Billy is saying, beside me. The same terror. You *mustn't!* he says.

In a way, it is interesting.

In another way, it makes me think we shouldn't be here.

C'mon Billy, I say. Let's go look at river! Nothing bad is going to happen to Tiger. See? Rachel will make sure it won't.

They can't hurt Tiger, he says.

"You can't hurt Tiger!" says Rachel.

Beth comes down at a run, hearing her daughter's screams. The three adults watch her. Rachel looks a little like sleepwalking, and a little like being awake.

None of the adults like it one bit.

They're not going to hurt him, I say to Billy. Let's go look at the river.

Billy likes the river, likes the sound of it. Likes the ripples.

Sometimes things drift down and past us. Logs, branches, interesting things that have escaped.

We both like things that have escaped.

He's got a car on his face, says Billy, slowly, when we're back in the house. Jenny, Beth and Rachel are upstairs. Just the cousin is up, on guard.

Yes, but you don't have to do anything to him. He'll leave you alone, and you'll leave him alone, and its all going to be all right. Okay?

There's Tiger, says Billy.

Yes, there's Tiger, I say. See? He's fine.

Tiger is sitting up on the table, watching the goings on with a skew expression. His face doesn't seem so mournful now. It doesn't look so resigned to the worst. He now looks like he's watching us all, puzzled but taking things in: the changes, the upheavals, the new strange light.

The light around me and Billy is amber, the colour of candlelight. It's not red, like the counsellors. Or red like where we went when I signed the release forms. We were there the longest time. But I don't like to think about the red place.

It's not like the green light, either, the green light that kills you before you can scream.

I've never heard talk of an amber light, not a colour like this.

Something's changed, something's skew, and a lot of it's to do with Rachel's father, from the sound of it. He gave some orders and brought us all back, even Billy and me.

Imagine that.

He's powerful. And Rachel, his blood, is the only one who can feel us.

I wonder to myself what he must be like, Rachel's father. I bet he doesn't smell of petrol. Or have tattoos.

He's not the sort of man you find round here, I think.

7. In Her Room

I watch her, Beth, sitting on the edge of her bed.

I watch her as she walks into the hallway. She listens to the slow breaths that come from behind closed bedroom doors.

All are finally asleep.

She walks softly back to her own room, takes her metal clip from her hair, pulls up the sleeves of her shirt, bares her wrist. Makes a series of small slow straight scratches, over and over, until the crimson comes bright against her pale skin. She watches as this new blood shows, and relaxes.

I can feel it. I feel the calming of her inside, the body's bright and clear reaction, the lifting of oppressive heat and darkness.

By the time the blood is dried there is cool fresh air again.

She is alone and surrounded by the silence and the peace.

This cutting, it has nothing to do with wanting death. She never comes close to dying.

This cutting is just her way of getting through to herself again. Past the static. Past the fences. Past the pain.

I know how it works.

I know all about the release that comes after cutting things.

I've been there.

I've done it myself.

Goodnight, I say, as she closes her eyes to sleep at last.

See you in the morning.

And then back to Five. To fight my corner again. I have a division to manage.

Or rather, I have a division to rebuild, from the beginning.

I smile at the thought of that.

It's what the other two owners will never know.

Starting over is a wonderful thing.

I have chosen my crew for the Ark.

The living, the dead, the in-between.

It is not what anyone expects.

Well, there is virtue in that.

We shall see what happens. This time.

We shall see.

Daniel Kaysen's previous stories in *Interzone* were "The Eight-Moon Dollar" (issue 178), "The Comeback Season" (issue 184) and "Flights" (issue 188). He lives in Brighton, and lately has sold stories to a number of other markets.

Divina

A Tale of Bel'Esstar

Sarah Ash

Sheaths of yellowing funeral lilies still lay heaped upon the Divina Oralie's alabaster tomb, left by the crowds of mourners. The scent they gave off was faintly, nauseatingly sweet. But behind their cloying perfume Avenel could smell burning.

Oralie's sweetsilver voice floats across the hushed auditorium as the young diva appears alone on the stage. She is dressed in a long, trailing gown of ghost-white gauze artfully designed to leave one pale shoulder, one breast bare. Her golden hair, pale as summer barley, flows unbound to her waist. In one hand she clutches a poignard. Avenel watches mesmerized. She has become Ginevra, his beautiful, crazed Ginevra. The audience fall silent, forgetting their bonbons, their scandalous gossip. "Divina," they whisper. The poignancy of Oralie's singing has charmed them.

Avenel stood before her tomb, hands tucked in the pockets of his greatcoat, collar turned up against the drizzle.

As Oralie's voice spirals higher, she glides forwards, the train of her ghost-gauze gown trailing close, dangerously close to the unshielded flames of the footlights. A loose-trailing ribbon glances against one of the footlights and a tongue of flame goes snaking along the ribbon, igniting the gauze.

A shriek shatters the perfection of the music – and the Divina drops to the floor, enveloped in flames.

Calling her name, Avenel had clambered up onto the stage from the pit. He had flung his jacket over her to try to smother the flames. The other singers stood clutching each other, frozen in terror.

Oralie, his beloved muse, lay dying in agony.

Even now he could still smell that smell, that horrible rancid smell of burned flesh gusting on wisps of smoke, could still see the red weals weeping clear fluid; black flecks of charred net scorched into her ruined flesh.

"A doctor!" he had shouted although he knew there was no hope for her. "Fetch a doctor!"

Oralie's painted lids fluttered open, staring blindly into darkness.

"Avenel...?" Her glorious voice had faded to a whisper. Her long, barley-gold hair was gone leaving only a singed stubble still clinging to her skull. Where once there was smooth, ivory skin Avenel could see raw weals weeping clear fluid; the burned gauze had left black flecks in her ruined flesh. Faint, Avenel had turned away, wanting to retch.

"I am a doctor." The voice was softly dark, like evening shadows.

Avenel had looked up but smoke and tears had blurred his vision and he had found it difficult to focus clearly on the man's features.

And Oralie's eyes had opened. She fixed her wandering gaze on the stranger's face. Her lips tried to frame a word.

"You," she had said.

Oralie knew him. She had recognized the stranger.

Then all happened as if in a drugged dream, the doctor's carriage appearing at the stage door, his servants carrying Oralie out, Avenel stumbling after, moving slowly, too slowly, reaching the street as the carriage rattled away into the night.

"Wait! Wait!"

There had been a murmur of voices, all speaking at once, hands reaching out to restrain him.

"The doctor will care for her, Avenel."

"There's nothing more you can do."

"But who is he!" he had cried above the babble. "Where does he live, where has he taken her?"

No one seemed to know. No one had caught the mysterious doctor's address, no one could remember where he said his residence was...

And now she was dead.

Avenel's fingers slowly reached out, touched the fading petals of the funeral lilies. Brown pollen stained his fingertips. Dead a month. Yet he could not weep for her. His eyes were dry. Once he wept, he would acknowledge the fact of her death. Mourning was the beginning of acceptance. In refusing to mourn he kept her – in some inexplicable way – alive.

"I thought I might find you here."

Peripin, Manager of the Opera House, stood in the dank cemetery, holding his black silk hat.

Had Peripin come to offer his condolences? What were the use of condolences, sympathetic words? Avenel could not drag his eyes from the tomb. Oralie lay so close – yet all he could do was caress the cold alabaster that encased her body.

"Such a tragedy, Illustre Brumaire. But never fear – your new opera will be a triumph. How close is it to completion?" Peripin added slyly.

"My new opera?" Avenel blinked away a drop of rain.

"*Ilmira*, a lyric drama in three acts. To be performed before his highness the Prince in two months' time...?"

Only two months... he had lost all track of time.

"*Ilmira*? Impossible without Oralie."

"There are other singers."

Avenel cast Peripin a look of chilling cold. "For me there can be no other singer."

"Fine sentiments, Illustre. Noble. But Opera Houses do not run on fine sentiments. There are plenty of composers queuing at my door. Composers who do not care overmuch who sings their music. Composers whose new melodies will fill the house," Peripin said with a little shrug – at once careless and callous. "Perhaps you should reconsider... if you wish to retain your position at the Opera House."

"The Prince appointed me himself."

"But what use to the Prince is a composer who does not compose?" Peripin replaced his silk hat, tapping it in place with an elegant little gesture.

The absinthe in the Opera Tavern tasted bitter as despair. Avenel retired to an obscure alcove to drink. No one paid him much attention.

The Opera House had re-opened with his rival Messidor's new comic opera *Duel of Hearts*. Now Messidor's trivial, banal little melodies were being sung and whistled on every street corner.

Avenel tried to lose himself in his composing – yet every time he sat down at the keyboard, he saw Oralie fall in flames, heard her voice screaming above the choking smoke. His new opera lay unfinished. What was the

point in finishing it? *She* was gone.

And then he heard his name.

"I'm looking for Avenel Brumaire. I was told I might find him here."

Probably some damned music journalist, pursuing him about an article for the *Mercur*. He rose, hoping to slip away before anyone pointed him out. But the absinthe had made him clumsy and he lurched into the table, upsetting his glass.

"Do I have the honour of addressing Avenel Brumaire?" The voice was darkly soft, like evening shadows. He had heard it before.

Slowly Avenel raised his head to find himself staring into an unfamiliar face, framed by hair that glistened metal-grey in the lamplight. Eyes, golden-brown as amber, regarded him with disconcerting shrewdness from beneath wildly-flaring dark brows.

"What if you are?" He could not remember ever seeing the man before – and yet that soft voice sent a shiver of recognition through his fuddled brain.

"I've spent many days, Illustre, seeking you out. Let me at least buy you another drink."

"W – well –" Avenel was vaguely aware that another drink might tip him into unconsciousness. But if it was free, who was he to argue? "Wine, then," he managed, sinking back into the alcove seat.

"Wine. The best." The stranger raised one hand and clicked his fingers. The lamplight caught fire in the blood-ruby on his hand, glinting like a distant beacon.

The wine was redder than the stranger's ruby; it tasted of autumn vineyards, rich and mellow.

"I have long admired your work, Illustre Brumaire."

Avenel let out a grunt of self-deprecation.

"The beauty of your Ilsevine Mass, the vivacity of the Coraline Cantatas, the sublime anguish of *Ginevra* –"

Avenel could hardly bear to hear the titles of his works spoken aloud. He ground his teeth together, trying to blot out the stranger's voice. This was all work done, work finished, work achieved before –

Before.

"Tell me. What are you working on at present?"

The stark question stabbed like a knife to the brain.

"Nothing."

In the silence it seemed to Avenel that all in the tavern had stilled, watching, waiting for the stranger's response.

"Nothing? The most original composer of our age tells me he is writing nothing?"

"What of it?" Avenel said in a snarl. And suddenly he wanted to unburden himself, to let all the grief and frustration pour out. What he could not tell his closest friends, he now began, almost incoherently, to tell this unnamed stranger.

The stranger listened without comment. Once he raised his glass to his lips and silently drank a mouthful of the rich red wine. Avenel heard himself talking of Oralie, of her death, of the emptiness of his life without her. He knew he had said too much yet somehow could not stop; it was almost as if the stranger were charming the words from him.

"So," the stranger said. "Your muse is dead and your life seems pointless without her."

His muse. Avenel reached for his glass and choked down more wine. Now it tasted as bitter as the absinthe.

"Perhaps I could help you."

"You?" Avenel let out a contemptuous laugh. "How could you help me?"

"In ways you cannot possibly begin to imagine."

"That damned money-grabbing Peripin sent you. Didn't he?"

The strains of Messidor's melodies drifted in from the street.

"Who cares if I never compose another note?" Avenel said thickly. "What does it matter?"

"It matters to you, evidently," said the stranger. He rose, casting down a handful of coins to pay for the wine. "Oh – and this is for you. Tomorrow night. Make sure you're there, Illustre."

A black card lay on the table. At first Avenel took it for a funeral invitation. The printed words blurred as he tried to focus, written in silver lettering, they glimmered as if written in moonlight:

THEATRE DES TENEBRES

*They move, they dance, they sing!
Asmodé's Astonishing Automata
You'll believe they're alive*

*One Performance Only
The House of Asphodel
Midnight*

"M – Madame Asphodel's? Wait –"

But Avenel was talking to himself; the doctor had vanished.

Tap tap tap.

Avenel jerked awake.

It was the dreary hour between night and sunrise when the sky is grey as shadow, the hour when lovers slip from their mistresses' boudoirs and creep guiltily home.

He was back in his own bedchamber. He had no recollection of how he had got there. His head was a mud-dle of absinthe-tainted dreams.

On the floor lay unpaid bills and faded copies of the *Mercur*e and *Gazette*, gathering dust. He had not let the concierge into his rooms to clean for weeks, he had ignored all calls and letters from friends and debtors alike.

Tap tap tap.

He struggled to his feet. He had fallen asleep in his clothes, huddled in on himself like a child on his bed.

He unlatched the rusted shutters and opened them. The first rays of the rising sun gilded the rooftops – as, in a feathered flutter, a bird flew up from the sill and flew away into the dawn.

Only a bird. A dove. Pecking for crumbs of bread.

There's no bread here. Only an empty bottle of absinthe.
The knocking came again – louder, more insistent.

"Illustre Brumaire! Open up – or we break down this door!"

As soon as Avenel had unlatched the front door, two burly men thrust their way past him; a third followed, clutching a sheaf of official-looking papers.

"We've come for the piano."

"What's happening?" Avenel said, bewildered.

"You're in debt, Illustre. The piano's being repossessed."

"Not my piano!" The sketches for his new opera *Ilmira* lay on the top, covered in a thin film of grey dust. "Wait!"

"Only doing our job, Illustre," said the third with a shrug. "Sign here, please."

"Wait!" Avenel made a grab for the sheets of music that came cascading off the top of the piano as they lifted it. "Anything but my piano –"

They were already out of the apartment, kicking the door shut behind them; he heard them arguing about the best way to take the instrument down the narrow stairs.

He stared at the dusty boards where the piano had stood. Now how was he to finish the commission?

He sat down heavily on the bed, drawing one hand over his stubbled cheek; his head pounded, throbbing from the after-effects of liquor on an empty stomach.

A little black card dropped to the floor. Avenel picked it up and saw the silver writing glint dully in the grey daylight.

The Théâtre des Ténèbres... there was something of the occult that intrigued him in the shadowy title, that appealed to his morbid frame of mind.

But who was the stranger? A fellow student from his Conservatoire days, perhaps? A rich bourgeois, wanting to commission a composition so that his name would be preserved forever in the dedication?

And what was he to make of this diabolic name, Asmodé? Asmodé the trickster, daemon of discord, daemon of jealousy. Assumed, no doubt, for theatrical purposes, to conceal behind its glamorously satanic aura, a more mundane identity.

"Perhaps I could help you..."

A string of pale lamps illuminated the quai; floating moons half-hidden by river-mists rising from the grey Dniera below.

Twice Avenel had approached the torch-lit entrance to Madame Asphodel's – and twice he had turned away. Midnight had struck some minutes ago, muffled chimes on the misty air.

He leaned his arms on the stone balustrade overlooking the river. A little way upstream lay a pebbled beach that shelved gently towards the slow-moving Dniera. If he were to strip off his clothes and wade out through the shallows, the cold midriver currents would catch him and pull him under, putting an end to these endless sterile, empty days –

And then he heard the voice, floating on the midnight air, faint and faraway, silver echoes of a dream.

Was he hallucinating? He gazed up at the shadowy terrace overlooking the river. The voice was coming from the

House of Asphodel – and the music was his: Ginevra's lament, the aria *she* had been singing when the flames had taken her from him.

Avenel ran across the damp cobbles, fumbling in his pocket for the silver-rimmed ticket to show the door-keeper.

As he reached the salon, the voice fell silent but the last notes still echoed and re-echoed in his mind, exquisite as silver filigree. Applause filled the silence.

Desert spices burned in the salon lamps, giving off odours of sandalwood and patchouli. Madame Asphodel's wealthy patrons sat on gilded chairs facing a little stage draped in swathes of cloudy gauze.

Then he saw the singer and for one moment his heart stopped.

Her fair hair tumbled about her milky shoulders like a veil. Her silk gown was white as moonlight.

So like...

"You see her?" someone whispered. "Damned clever that fellow Asmodé. You'd never believe they were just dolls, would you?"

"Dolls?" muttered Avenel, still staring. What crude, cruel charade had he been drawn into? How dare this charlatan Asmodé defile her memory!

And yet the voice had sounded so like...

The gauzes parted and a man appeared. He raised his hand for silence – and Avenel saw the lamplight glint red in the blood-ruby on his ring-finger. It was his benefactor from the Opera Tavern.

"Thank you, gentlemen, thank you. Through the magic of Asmodé's Automata, the great Oralie has returned from the dead to entrance you with her singing. I trust you have all enjoyed our little divertissement."

"Encore, Divina! Encore!"

Avenel was already moving towards the stage, threading through the audience, determined to confront the charlatan and his mechanical toys.

But Madame Asphodel's dancing girls suddenly burst onto the little stage, strings of golden discs jingling around their bare ankles and wrists as they moved. Gosamer silks from Enhirrà, red as the desert sands, barely concealed the voluptuousness of their soft bodies; their pouting lips were painted crimson as midsummer rose petals. Through the loose-draped silks, Avenel caught a glimpse of nipples stained a darker, richer red. He stared at them, through them.

Asmodé and his automata had disappeared.

Avenel thrust his way through the dancers, ignoring their indignant squeals.

"And where do you think you're going, young man?" The massive bulk of Madame Asphodel blocked his way.

"Where is he?" Avenel cried. "I have to see him!"

"Upsetting my girls like that – I should have you thrown out."

"Illustre Brumaire." The man who called himself Doctor Asmodé appeared out of the shadows.

"That voice. Who was singing?" demanded Avenel.

Doctor Asmodé opened a door and ushered Avenel inside.

A figure stood at the shuttered window, staring into nothing. A woman dressed in white silk.

"M – madame?" Avenel stammered. Was this the unseen singer? "I did not mean to intrude –"

The woman still stared fixedly in front of her, her blonde head held haughtily high.

He took a tentative step towards her.

The jarring clickety-click of whirring mechanism made him jump back.

She pirouetted on her toes and faced him.

Her face was Oralie's – in as much as a painted doll can resemble a human.

The blood-red cupid's bow dropped open, displaying white-painted teeth.

A bizarre sound issued from the throat as the head pivoted around, lacquered horsehair lashes fluttering. The automaton dipped, this way and that, eyes staring glassily into nothing as the song ground to a low, horrid groan.

"I thought she had fully run down," Doctor Asmodé went over to the automaton. Only now did Avenel see the key protruding from the waist of her dress. "But evidently not. Your arrival must have somehow triggered the mechanism."

Something snapped in Avenel's brain. He grabbed hold of the doctor by the shoulders, pulling his face close to his own, spitting out his anger and frustration. "You insult my intelligence with clockwork dolls? What possible point can there be in that?"

"Oralie may have neglected to mention to you that we had been working together to find a way to preserve her voice, her gift, for posterity. She wanted to leave more than memories behind when she died. And I wanted to animate my automata..."

"This was Oralie's idea?" Avenel's hands dropped to his sides.

"If you'll permit me to provide a proper demonstration..." Doctor Asmodé, one hand about the automaton's waist to steady it, busied himself with the key.

Avenel watched, unable to suppress a growing feeling of distaste at seeing the man's hands moving over the doll's body.

"I have heard of men who – who use dolls like this for unnatural acts. I hope you are not suggesting that I –"

The doctor straightened up, drawing hastily back from his automaton as it whirled into life.

The silver tones of the Divina Oralie flowed from the parted, painted lips.

Avenel closed his eyes to listen. A faint hissing sound dimmed the brilliance of the higher notes... but the intuitively musical phrasing was unmistakeably hers as was the clear voice, angelic in its purity yet imbued with the richer hues of human emotion and experience.

When he opened his eyes, Doctor Asmodé had extinguished all but a single candle in the room. In the guttering candle smoke, Avenel could almost believe that she stood there in the shadows.

"Well, Illustre?" Asmodé said softly. "Now do you believe that I can help you?"

"H – her voice. It's really her voice." Avenel was shaking. "How did you do it? Are you some kind of spirit medium?"

"I am merely an ingénieur, Illustre, with an obsessive

love of music. But lacking any musical talent of my own, I have found myself obliged to strive to capture the talents of others more gifted than myself."

"I don't understand." Avenel, still shaking, could not make sense of what the doctor was saying.

"I have constructed a machine that traces the patterns our voices make upon the air."

Avenel stared at him blankly.

"The fluctuations in the air that occur when we speak or sing are traced onto a rotating cylinder coated with a thin film of lampblack. I have another here; let me show you."

He opened a wooden case and carefully extracted a glass cylinder. Avenel took the cylinder gingerly in his hands and examined the scored traces made on the lamp-black. How could such a sublime sound be captured within those thin, wavering zig-zagging lines?

"And I thought you might also like to see the letter she wrote me..."

"A letter!" Avenel felt an sharp stab of jealousy; why had Oralie never once mentioned anything about ingenieurs, glass cylinders or recordings made for posterity? They had sworn to keep no secrets from each other. Had there been more than a professional understanding between her and Doctor Asmodé?

He opened the folded paper with trembling fingers, catching the faintest breath of faded perfume, her favourite orange blossom, and read, throat tightening, what she had written to Asmodé:

"Now, dear doctor, my voice will still be heard long after I am dead... It is as if you had snared a part of my soul in your machine."

She could not have known that her life was to end so cruelly, so unexpectedly after writing those words.

Avenel refolded the paper and handed it back to Asmodé without a word.

"Well?" said Asmodé softly. "Do you agree to my proposal?"

"Your proposal?" Avenel stared at him, not understanding.

"I am offering you the chance to free yourself, Avenel Brumaire, to unlock your creative gifts. To compose again."

"I – I cannot possibly afford to buy your machine –"

"She is not for sale," Asmodé said, smiling.

"But then, how –"

"My atelier is at your disposal until your new opera is finished. You can work there undisturbed as long as you like... with Asmodéa as your sole companion."

To a debt-ridden musician the offer was irresistible. And yet Avenel found himself hesitating. The days of rich musical patrons were long gone. There was always a hidden catch to every contract...

"But you, doctor, what is your interest in this? Not purely philanthropic, surely!"

Asmodé shrugged. "Of course, if you wish to walk away from my offer..."

The gauze-draped room shimmered and swirled before Avenel's eyes. In the smoky shadows he could almost believe that Asmodéa was...

"Oralie," he whispered.

Asmodé's house stood close by, a grey town mansion set back from the cobbled quai. These riverside mansions were home to wealthy merchants and notaries; those who aspired to the grander hotels and elegant squares frequented by the nobility but had not yet made quite enough money to achieve their dreams.

Avenel climbed the wide stone steps, clutching the portfolio containing the sketches for his unfinished opera. There was no brass plate on the door revealing the true identity of his benefactor, only a gleaming door-knocker. He rapped: once, twice.

The door was opened by a little maidservant in a grey gown, a wide-eyed waif of a girl, scarcely more than a child.

"Please to come in, Illustre," she said in a whisper. "Follow me."

He found himself staring closely at her, wondering for a moment, if she were another of Asmodé's automata. But then he dismissed the idea as stupidly fanciful; her sallow skin was blemished and the hand that grasped the banister-rail was red and rough from kitchen-work. She was all too real, displaying none of Asmodéa's porcelain perfection.

As he climbed the stairs behind her, he found himself looking around, searching for clues to the ingénieur's identity. But the hall – like so many bourgeois houses in this quartier of Bel'Esstar – was papered with a sombre maroon damask print and covered with dull engravings of ancient ruins.

"In here, Illustre." The maid opened a door – and Avenel saw a music room dominated by a grand piano, its shiny lid propped open. And standing at the window, staring out unseeing across the river, the silent, still figure of Asmodéa.

"The doctor says you can work here undisturbed. If you want anything, just ring for me."

"And where is the good doctor?" Avenel asked, eyeing the automaton uneasily.

"Oh, working in his laboratory as usual, Illustre."

The maid bobbed a curtsey and had all but disappeared out of the door when Avenel called her back.

"And what's your name, dem'selle?"

Her pale face flushed a delicate pink. "Cicilie. But the doctor calls me Cici." She hurried away before he could ask any more questions, leaving him alone with the silent Asmodéa.

A desk beside the piano had been thoughtfully supplied with manuscript paper, pen, pencils and ink. He sat down at the keyboard and drifted his fingers over the keys, wincing at the unexpected brightness of the sound. It was a superb instrument with a well-balanced touch, expertly tuned. So long since he had touched a piano, far too long...

Now he had no excuse.

There had been a time when the organization of sounds and their transcription on paper had been as natural to Avenel as breathing. His mind had wreathed with voices and the intertwining lines of instruments; when he slept, he dreamed music.

It seemed to him now that he could never regain that

happy state ever again. He crouched over the paper, pen clenched in hand, wrenching each note from the darkest recesses of his soul till they fell, drops of heart's blood spattering the staves.

Phrases that would have pleased him before Oralie's death, now irritated him; they seemed trite, utterly lacking in meaning or subtlety.

Yet when the task seemed impossible, there was solace of a kind in going to the silent watcher at the window, placing his hands about her waist and winding the key. Then he would sit back and let Asmodéa fill the room with the ghost of her voice. And if he waited till sunset when twilight shadows seeped into the room before the candles were lit, he could half-close his eyes and imagine Oralie was there, her fair hair glimmering in the dim light, singing softly for him alone.

"My muse," he would murmur wryly. "My mechanical muse."

Once he even caught himself resting his head against the softness of her fair hair.

A faint tremor shuddered through the doll's rigid frame.

He started away, staring at the beautiful lifeless features, moulded in bisque porcelain to give the semblance of human skin, the glassily-staring eyes...

For a moment he had thought she –

But no, it must have been a last shudder of the mechanism as it wound down.

If Avenel wanted coffee, the maid Cici would come tip-toeing into the music room, if he was hungry, she would bring food: simple fare, fresh bread, soup, fruit...

Several times he tried to engage her in conversation, to prise out some details about her enigmatic employer – but each time she started to edge away towards the door. Had the doctor made her swear silence – on the pain of some terrible punishment if she revealed his secrets?

These questions troubled him less and less as the days passed and he rediscovered the broken musical threads of his opera. Obsessed with completing his opera, he worked late into the night, sleeping on the chaise longue under the protective gaze of Asmodéa.

It was as if the sound of Oralie's voice had some healing quality to it, a balm that wreathed a benign spell, unravelling the knotted strands of music from his mind.

"It is as if you had snared a part of my soul in your machine..."

The scent of orange blossom floated through Avenel's dreams. Someone was bending over him as he slept, someone whispered his name, drifting soft fingertips across his brow –

He woke to find the music room white with moonlight. A woman stood, silhouetted against the unshuttered window.

"Oralie?" he whispered. Still half-asleep, he went over to her and put his arms around her, leaning his head against hers, closing his eyes, wanting, wishing...

It seemed to him that he had never been more content, lulled in this moonlit dream where their souls were united as one.

"If only we could stay like this forever, Oralie," he murmured, "together, forever..."

And for a moment he thought he caught his words faintly echoed from within the doll's breast.

"Together, Avenel, forever..."

Could there be some grain of truth in what Oralie had written? Had the ingénieur captured something more than the sound of her voice within his machine?

A woman was singing.

Avenel opened one eye. He had fallen asleep sprawled over his score and the distant voice had subtly penetrated the darkness of his dreams, threading through like a strand of spun silver.

Now he listened, knowing himself awake.

Someone was singing *Ilmira's* Act III aria, the one he had been labouring on all week, the one that lay, still unfinished, on the desk before him.

Avenel threw open the door and dashed out onto the landing. The voice fell silent, but the last notes still echoed and re-echoed in his mind, exquisite as silver filigree.

He ran down the stairs, flinging open doors to left and right as he ran.

"Who is she? Where is she?"

All the rooms were shuttered, in darkness. No one was in.

Desperate now, he pushed through the servants' door and went into the kitchen.

There in the glow from the range was the little maid, Cici, scouring out dirty dishes. She looked up, startled, as he burst in.

"Who was singing?" he demanded.

Eyes wide, she stared fearfully up at him. "I forgot."

"Forgot what?" He was so agitated that the question burst from him like a ball from a pistol.

"He said I wasn't to disturb you. I'm so sorry, Illustre –"

"So it was you, Cici," he said, more gently this time. "Do you think you could sing for me again?"

"Oh b – but I've these dishes to do and the dinner's not finished –"

"Forget the dishes. Forget that I'm here. Just sing."

She gave him a wobbly little smile. "I'm not really very good." She dried her hands on her apron and half-turned away from him, closing her eyes as if to concentrate the better. Then, taking a soft, deep breath, she began to sing.

Avenel listened, astounded that such a pure, clear voice could come from so insignificant a girl. He had heard few such voices in his time. And she seemed to have a natural instinct for phrasing; she had intuitively understood the nuances of his new aria, as if he had spent weeks coaching her.

When she had finished, he sprang up and grabbed her by the hand.

"Come with me!"

In the music room, he made her sing scale after scale, testing her range. Her voice climbed upwards without effort: high B flat, C, C sharp, D...

She was, as he had suspected, a natural soprano. That unique clarity of tone and extraordinary range came only once or twice in a generation of singers. Of course, she would need tuition from an experienced teacher to bring

out her full potential, a teacher sensitive enough not to spoil the natural beauty of her tone. His old friend Felicien at the Conservatoire might be just the right man for the task.

"You have a gift, Cici. You shouldn't be washing dishes below stairs, you should be on stage at the Opera House. How did you learn my aria so fast?"

"I heard you playing, *Illustre*, such beautiful music..." her eyes misted over, "the melodies seemed to fill the house and I just had to listen. Then when I went away, they came with me, in my head."

So she was gifted with an exceptional memory too –

He was so excited he began sheafing through the untidy piles of manuscript paper, until he found *Ilmira's* Act II aria and thrust the sheets into her hands.

He sat down and began to play through the first few bars.

"You start here, Cici. After three beats –"

She looked at him in bewilderment. "I – I can't read music, *Illustre*."

"Then sing from memory. I'll help you..."

The door opened and the *ingenieur* came in. Cici looked round, her eyes dark with guilt.

"The dinner! It'll be spoiled!" She gathered up her skirts and fled before Avenel could stop her.

"So you've discovered my little songbird." The *ingenieur* went over to Asmodéa and removed the key from her waist. "You'll have no more use for Asmodéa, then..."

"No. Not any more. You see – Cicilie has exceptional potential." Avenel was so absorbed in his own plans that he paid scant attention to what the *ingenieur* was saying. "Felicien must hear her."

"Felicien?"

"Professor of Vocal Arts at the Conservatoire."

"You really think she's that good?"

"I want her for *Ilmira*."

"An unknown?"

"She's perfect. La Belair is too fat – and her vibrato is excruciating. Let me go speak to Peripin. There are strings I can pull –"

Breathless with excitement, Avenel seized his coat and went hurrying from the house on the quai.

He was halfway across the bridge over the Dniera before he realized how impulsively he was acting – risking the success of his opera on one untrained, untried girl.

Now that Avenel had found his *Ilmira*, his mechanical companion Asmodéa stood neglected at her place in the window whilst a stream of visitors from the Opera House and Conservatoire came and went. The shutters were flung open and the house on the quai echoed to the sound of vocal arpeggios and exercises. Eminent musicians were also invited to listen to the *ingenieur's* cylinders and though one or two expressed distaste at displaying the invention through the garish medium of the automaton "as if at some vulgar fairground attraction," others demanded that their voices should be recorded on Asmodé's cylinders too.

Not long afterwards, Doctor Asmodé removed Asmodéa to his atelier "for modifications." Avenel was not in the house on the quai that day, he was at the Opera House, supervising the first rehearsal of his score, correcting

copied instrumental parts and arguing with Peripin about the casting of the other roles.

"A NEW DIVINA!

"Unknown triumphs in Brumaire's *Ilmira*!"

Cicilie stood on stage, kissing her fingers to the cheering audience as admirers flung roses, white and gold, onto the boards. Soon her feet were lapped by a sea of scented rose petals. She gazed into the wings and beckoned Avenel on stage.

"Bru-maire! Bru-maire!"

"Go on, Avenel," Peripin said, beaming. "It's you they want."

For a moment Avenel hesitated, seeing not Cici but Oralie standing in the flicker of the footlights. A dazzle of flames burst in his mind and he stood paralysed, hearing again her cries of pain and terror...

"Avenel." Cici was calling him, smiling to him. He forced himself out onto the rose-strewn boards. The audience were stamping and clapping.

He took Cici's hand in his own and brought it to his lips.

"My *Ilmira*," he murmured, gazing into her eyes.

Weeks had passed since the triumphant first night of *Ilmira*. Caught up in a whirl of parties and musical soirées, Avenel had not once returned to the *ingenieur's* house on the quai. The Prince had been so pleased with *Ilmira* that he had established him in a fine new apartment, furnished with two pianos. After a little while, Cici had moved in with him.

Avenel sent an invitation inviting Doctor Asmodé to dinner but received no reply.

"Perhaps I should pay the doctor a visit," Cici said next morning. "I left one or two things at the house..."

It occurred to Avenel after she had left that he had never established the exact nature of the relationship between Doctor Asmodé and his "little songbird." Had they too been lovers? The thought sent a shiver of jealousy prickling through his whole body. He owed Asmodé a great deal – but Cici was his mistress now and he would not share her.

When the sun began to sink in the sky, reddening the spires and rooftops of the city and Cici had still not returned, Avenel set out to look for her.

The *ingenieur's* house on the quai was shuttered up. A maid was polishing the brass furniture on the front door of the next house; when Avenel asked if she knew where the owner had gone, she shrugged, blushing, and said she had heard he had "gone abroad" some time ago.

Some time ago.

Avenel went down to the tradesman's entrance and – with a little brute force – managed to break open the basement door.

The darkened house felt cold and neglected. It seemed obvious now that neither the *ingenieur* nor Cicilie was here. Unless she had kept her key...

Avenel climbed the service stairs from the basement, intending to let himself out by the front door.

And then he heard someone calling his name. A

woman's voice, faint and faraway.

"Cici?" he called back, hastening up the stairs. Had she fallen in the dark and hurt herself? "It's all right – I'm here!"

"Avenel..." The voice was coming from the music room. He flung open the door.

The music room was shrouded in sepia shadows.

A woman stood at the shuttered window, looking out at nothing.

"Cici?"

She did not stir.

"Cicilie, what's wrong?"

Avenel hurried towards her, put his hands on her shoulders, spinning her around.

Dust powdered the air. He was staring into the glassy eyes of the abandoned Asmodéa, her cheeks still delicately rouged, her wig of natural hair a little awry. Spiders had woven nests in the dusty curls; a scatter of minuscule black insects trickled from the curled lashes down the faded face like inky tears.

"Ugh!" His hands dropped to his sides; he started to back away.

"Avenel." A voice breathed his name; slowly, jerkily, the arms creaked upwards, the jointed hands clamped onto his shoulders.

"Don't go, Avenel. Stay with me."

Choking on the billowing dust, Avenel tried to extricate himself from the automaton's embrace – and found he

could not move.

"Oralie?"

"I need you, Avenel." The automaton's dank breath stank of must and decay. "And you need me. You need your muse."

Crawling things appeared from crevices and holes in the mildewed horsehair body...

"No –" Avenel whispered.

The strong grip tightened, drawing him closer to the automaton's breast, closer. He began to struggle, feeling the life crushed slowly out of him.

"H – help me –"

Who was there to hear his cries? The house was empty, shuttered up.

The doll's chipped ruby lips parted, pressing down against his working mouth, smothering his protests as his consciousness slowly faded...

"We belong together. Together, Avenel... forever."

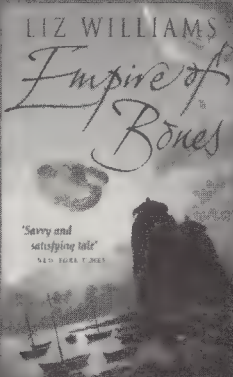
Sarah Ash's previous stories for *Interzone* were "Mothmusic" (#62), "Airs from Another Planet" (#83), "Brief Flare" (#86) and "Merveille" (#129). Her fourth fantasy novel, *Lord of Snow and Shadows*, appeared recently from Transworld/Bantam Press. She lives in Beckenham, Kent.

A NEW NOVEL FROM Liz Williams

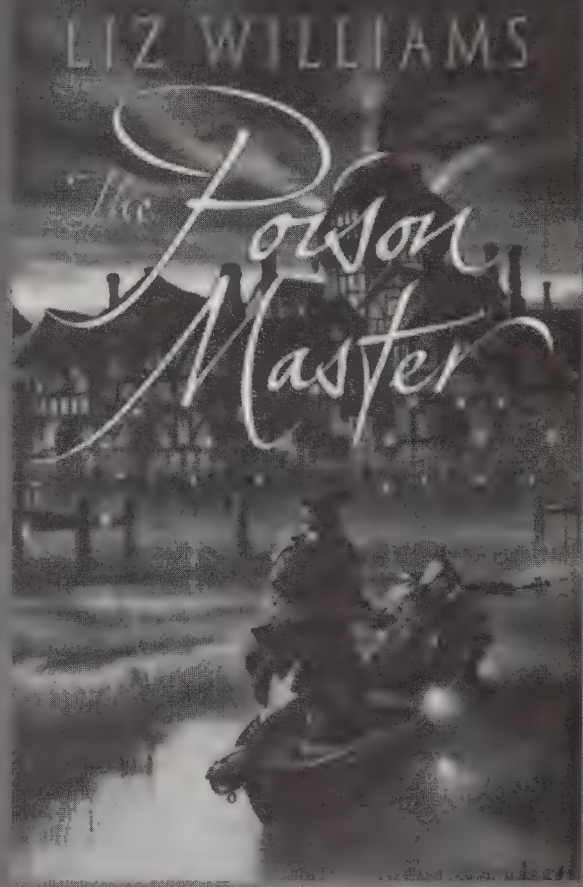
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ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

The sf award season was launched at the British Eastercon with a wondrously silly Tiptree presentation to M. John Harrison for *Light*, and very fetching he looked in the statutory tiara. BSFA Awards were presented at the same event... Nonfiction: my introduction to *Maps: The Uncollected John Sladek*. Artwork: Dominic Harman, *Interzone* 179 cover. Short: Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*. Novel (to wild applause): Christopher Priest, *The Separation*.

THE POTTERS OF FIRSK

Mike Ashley is a happy man: "I've just heard I've won the Edgar for my *Mammoth Encyclopedia of Modern Crime Fiction*. Wheeeeeeeeeee..."

Margaret Atwood explains the vast gulf between our world and hers: "Science fiction has monsters and space-ships; speculative fiction could really happen." (*Guardian* interview, 26 April) Play it again, Ms Atwood: "*Oryx and Crake* [her new novel] is not science fiction. It is fact within fiction. Science fiction is when you have rockets and chemicals." (*New Scientist* interview) And again: "... *Oryx and Crake* is a speculative fiction, not a science fiction proper. It contains no intergalactic space travel, no teleportation, no Martians." (Book-of-the-Month Club)

John Betancourt of Wildside Press has offered to buy the book assets of the insolvent UK small press Big Engine. Dashing the hopes of magazine fans, he adds: "My offer did not include *3SF* magazine. I don't need another magazine; *Weird Tales* and *H.P. Lovecraft's Magazine of Horror* are quite enough for now!" The latter (no unsolicited submissions, please) is being edited by Marvin Kaye.

Jim Burns has been lying low and letting Rowena (see below) take all the flak generated by Saddam Hussein's enthusiasm for bad rip-offs of fantasy

art. But he gleefully spotted "the really crummy copy of my *The Ceremonies* [T. E. D. Klein] painting which hangs in Saddam's loveshack, mirrored bedroom, above the bed (such images it provokes!)."

Charles L. Grant was named as the writer to be honoured with this year's International Horror Guild Living Legend Award.

Christopher Priest is overcome with excitement at the news that his novel *The Prestige* seems set to become a film directed by *Memento* man Christopher Nolan, from a script by his brother Jonathan Nolan.

Rowena (Morrill) had a moment of undesired fame when copies of two of her paintings were found hanging in a Baghdad house allegedly used for naughty purposes by Saddam Hussein. One, the cover for Andrew J. Offutt's *King Dragon*, can be seen on the CNN website.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

More Awards. *Nebulas*... Novel: Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*. Novella: Richard Chwedyk, "Bronte's Egg." Novelette: Ted Chiang, "Hell is the Absence of God." Short: Carol Emshwiller, "Creature." Script: *The Fellowship of the Ring*. • **Dick Award** for sf paperback original: Carol Emshwiller, *The Mount*. • **Prometheus** (libertarian sf) shortlist: Ken MacLeod, *Dark Light*; J. Neil Schulman, *Escape from Heaven*; F. Paul Wilson, *The Haunted Air*; Terry Pratchett, *Night Watch*, Greg Egan, *Schild's Ladder*.

Unclean! Unclean! "Booksellers could be ignoring a potentially immense market by hiding fantasy books away at the back of the shop and displaying them together with science fiction, according to new market research undertaken by Harper-Collins..." (*Publishing News*)

Hugo Nominations. Rather than list all 65 nominations, I'll just note the two most popular categories. Novel: Michael Swanwick, *Bones of the Earth*; Robert J. Sawyer, *Hominids*; David Brin, *Kiln People*; China Miéville, *The Scar*; Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Years of Rice and Salt*. Dramatic Presentation (Long): *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*; *The Two Towers*; *Minority Report*; *Spi-der-Man*; *Spirited Away*. Elsewhere, my own *Ansible* has shifted from the Fanzine category to lock horns with *Interzone* (and the inevitable winner *Locus*) as "Semiprozine."

As Others See Us. Patrick Gale's review of that new Margaret Atwood admires her "gleeful inventiveness" in imagining unheard-of wonders like "rats genetically spliced to snakes" or "pain-free chickens developed to produce only multiple breasts," yet dutifully avoids calling this sc**nce f*ct**n: "In *Oryx And Crake* she makes

a welcome return to fantasy. She would probably chuckle at that and murmur 'if only' for, like *The Handmaid's Tale*, it is less a fantasy than an imaginative projection with a rational foundation in current facts." Gale's other acceptable code phrase for the genre that dares not speak its name is "dystopian myth." (*Waterstone's Books Quarterly*)

R.I.P. Jacques Chambon (1942-2003), French sf editor and translator, died on 16 April following a heart attack. He was a major editor for 12 years at Editions Denoel, and since 1998 at Editions Flammarion. **John Foyster** (1941-2003), among the most influential of Australian sf fans, died on 5 April after long and unsuccessful treatment for a brain tumour. His achievements were numerous; internationally, the best known was *Australian SF Review*, of which John was a founding editor. He was also a friend, and much missed. **Anne Gwynne** (1918-2003), US film actress during the 1940s and 50s, died on 31 March aged 84. Her many genre films included *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940 serial), *Weird Woman* (1944), *House of Frankenstein* (1945), and *Teenage Monster* (1957). **Willis E. McNelly** (1920-2003), academic, editor, and compiler of the 1984 *Dune Encyclopedia*, died on 7 April aged 82.

Another SF Crossword Clue.

"Writer removes them in casual conversation (6)" (*Guardian*, 23 April)

Horror Awards. Extracts from copious shortlists.... *Bram Stoker*. Novel: Douglas Clegg, *The Hour Before Dark*; Stephen King, *From a Buick 8*; Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*; Tom Piccirilli, *The Night Class*; Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones*. For Young Readers: Clive Barker, *Abarat*; Nancy Etchemendy, *Cat in Glass and Other Tales of the Unnatural*; Neil Gaiman, *Coraline*; Richard Matheson and William Stout, *Abu & The Seven Marvels*. • **International Horror Guild**. Novel: Ramsey Campbell, *The Darkest Part of the Woods*; Douglas Clegg, *The Hour Before Dark*; John Connolly, *The Killing Kind*; Gregory Frost, *Fitcher's Brides*; Stephen King, *From a Buick 8*; Dan Simmons, *A Winter Haunting*. • IHG nominees also include, though in separate categories, *Abarat* (Graphic Narrative) and the all-conquering *Coraline* (Long Form). • As a contributor, I was pleased to see Richard Bleiler's epic two-volume *Supernatural Fiction Writers* on both the non-fiction shortlists; so is Ramsey Campbell's essay collection *Ramsey Campbell, Probably*.

Thog's Masterclass. *Department of Relativity*. "That mountain's less than twelve thousand feet high – that's only two thousand under Earth gravity..." (Arthur C. Clarke, "The Sentinel," 1951)

PS: The crossword answer was Asimov.

The first one. Isolated farmhouse, middle of nowhere, middle of winter. You're with the others. You don't know them that well yet, but you have to trust them. You go into the house late at night, after dark, dressed in black. Masked.

You surprise the adults as they sit in front of the telly. Two adults. You get their phones first. You wake the kids, bring them from their bedrooms. Three kids. One's only a tad younger than you. You gag and tie them in the living room. There's a little dog yapping in the kitchen. You'd wondered whether you'd be able to when it came to it, but you kill it without a second thought. You can tell the kids are upset, they're crying or something, but you don't care.

You all get involved. Cindy, Steve, Kevin, Beth, Jim. Looking through wallets, taking credit cards, taking cash. Finding out where jewellery and bank stuff is hidden. Kevin gets pin codes by cutting the youngest kid. Doesn't need much to make them talk. Not a rich family, but you knew that already. This first one is kind of a test.

Then you kill them all. You sort of know it is weird even as you're doing it. You use knives and razors. You slit their throats, all of them, even the kids. No witnesses. Then you make your escape, all of you.

Snow is just starting to fall. That's not too good; could leave tracks. The van is there, waiting, the driver locked safe in his cab. That is good.

That's how it was in the chilled gang, Miss Tyrrall. You're right, by the way, it is good to talk about it.

We only started coming down as we drove around, miles and miles and miles of sodium lights A- and B-roads, back into London but not the most direct way. The driver had his instructions.

We all of us began quivering, shivering, just like the times when we'd taken chiller before, when there was no operation. Steve cried a little; well, he sniffled, but he soon stopped. I felt sick, my stomach slimy and clenched and full of water, but at the same time I felt high, like I was up on some kind of a tightrope with the wind in my hair. And I felt I was somehow connected with the world, too, rooted in its earth. But then I felt sweaty, edgy.

Odd. Mixed up.

I guess we were all like that. The drug, and what we'd done, both. I closed my eyes and remembered the dead, the horrible blood spurts, the evil way the kids twitched afterwards until, thank God, Beth finished them off half-properly. We weren't any of us real experts, see. That's partly the point. It all kept revolving in front of me, bright and scarlet and pumping. The terrified kids, their eyes wide. I think one of them shat himself. I think I was going to vomit.

But I didn't. It didn't seem real. As we were doing it it didn't seem real. That's also the point. But it wasn't like one of those videos, either.

I checked the others. They all seemed scared, wobbly-lipped. Not wanting to look at each other. We were each in our own heads, thinking about what we'd done.

A mobile ring-tone gave me a hell of a shock in the silence. Kevin answered. It was only the driver, up front.

Nicholas Waller

The boss had made contact. He'd told him it worked. He wanted to meet.

We swapped vans, Luton or Watford or somewhere near the M1, made it to the rendezvous down miserable damp roads, a safe house in Hammersmith. It was still dark, an endless night. The guy we knew as the boss came, masked, shades on, with his bodyguard. Maybe he wasn't the real boss, taking no chances. He didn't seem to want to speak. Kevin reported exactly what we'd done. He looked at us oddly. Like he was proud of us, of himself, but also a bit wary. Even a bit sick.

He still took the money, the credit cards, the pin codes, the usernames. He gave us each £500 in used notes! He said nothing about another job.

His people took our stained black shirts and stuff, gave us back our normal clothes, our wallets and normal lives. Well, sort of.

Just before dawn, washed and changed and looking like a bunch of students and junior typists, we left the house, in ones and twos. I remember the ground was white with thin crunchy snow and the sky was utterly clear and cold, the last stars fading away. It was going to be my favourite kind of sunny blue crispy cold January day. Fabulous. A good-to-be-alive kind of day.

We were supposed to split up, go our separate ways, not contact each other, but I needed some company. Cindy obviously felt the same, and we took the tube to Leicester Square. I didn't really like her that much. She was boring and whiny, skinny and her head was too big. I actually prefer women like you, Miss Tyrrall, if you'll forgive me, but then you're high-powered and live in a big house and I bet you don't pay much attention to people like me. Normally.

We got a coffee in Old Compton Street. Both of us wanted to stay out where there were crowds of people, I guess. We wanted to talk about what had happened, but we didn't, as well. But what else to talk about? What did you get for Christmas? No chance. Not now. So we sat in silence, watching the shops rattle open, people start working, black cabs driving past. Drinking coffee after coffee.

As soon as the pubs opened we were in one. I had a pint of lager. Cindy said she thought about a Bloody Mary, but she had a vodka and orange; reminded her of Florida. Not sure why, she says she's never been. And anyway she's too young to drink over there. We found a quiet corner, cool and dark far from the bar. We had a second drink.

Finally we talked about chiller and what it did to us. Not the techie malarkey about the drug suppressing the neural metabolism in the super giro limbic forebrain or whatever, blah blah – Beth was into that, but then she'd been a trainee nurse till she dropped out. I said it was like being behind one-way glass, or wearing rubber gloves. Cindy said, no, it was like you're deaf, your eyes wide open but your ears full of cotton wool.

It's odd, I try to imagine things. Don't you? Try and imagine what it must be like on a plane you know is going to crash, you know you're going to die. What were those people thinking as we killed them and their kids one by one? The fear, the despair when they knew that

there was absolutely nothing they could do to stop us killing them. What did they feel? Looking at oblivion...

Death is coming.

No way out.

Death comes.

Where does all that fear go? Into the universe? Into me? What's it really like? Does it really matter?

I'm just glad it wasn't me. I was amazed I'd done those things, amazed at the power of chiller. But that's the point. It distances. I told Cindy that part of me felt disgusted by what we must have done... but it was already hard to remember. Like being drunk, but not wiped out – you know what you're doing at the time, even if you forget a lot of the details in the morning.

Finally, Cindy admitted that she was glad she'd done it. She actually enjoyed the killing, thinking back. It excited her. And you know what? I had to agree. And we agreed it made our tiny hardcore so-called "video club" pretty tame. And redundant.

We ended up in bed that afternoon, in her tatty place in Tower Hamlets. Bit of comfort really, but she was too bony and scraggle-haired for me. I guess alcohol does that to you. Makes you do things you might not do otherwise.

Sorry, Miss Tyrrall. Mind if I have another drink?

The next day I was on a high. I didn't talk to Cindy, or anyone. Well, I called in sick at work, but I couldn't sit alone at home... a one-room flat, and damp, too. No, I walked and walked, all over London, the Eye, Oxford Street, Tower Bridge, looking at all the people. Alive, somehow because I let them stay alive. It only takes a second... I felt excited, like I'd been in a war and lived through it and learned some secret. We got away with it!

But also the whole thing felt like it happened to someone else, years ago. Finally, I realized I was really looking forward to another job.

And I wondered if I could kill without taking chiller first. I guessed not. I did briefly consider offing Mrs Ayres' fat black cat, from the flat above me, as a kind of test. But it had a personality of sorts. And Mrs Ayres needed the thing, since her husband left. If the cat died, she'd just come round pestering me. The kitten the boss had got for me to train on before, I don't where that came from. He got me to kill it, slowly. I could never have done that without chiller.

Clever, he was. Reeled us in. Did it carefully, slowly. Sort of knew what we'd be like, chillered. From the club. He matched us, made us a team.

Anyway, best not try anything, not without the planning. The boss was good at the logistics, made sure we hit an easy target and would get away. He'd thought it all through.

No one would suspect us. A normal bunch of young kids. A junior office worker, a failed nursing student, a redundant printer, a comic-book collector, a TV junkie. Not petty crims, not really known to the police or social services. Not gun nuts or anything. Polite enough, respectable enough, fade-into-the-crowd types, who needed a bit more money than they had.

Most people would say we were incapable of harm or violence. But isn't that often the way? If they'd only

known, eh, Miss Tyrrall?

The second day the bodies were found. Turned out it was a place in Essex that we'd hit. Huge story in the *Evening Standard*; one of the guys worked in the City. Big even in the nationals – pages 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 12-15 in one, and all over the telly. They could tell it was something special, I guess, something new.

I recognized the farmhouse, from the photos and the useful maps in the papers, but it wasn't like it was something I was part of... not really.

I wanted to go there, hang around the police lines with the other gawpers. I knew it was a stupid idea but I couldn't help it. I took a train to Witham and walked half-way out to the location – Gretney Farm, near Little Braxted, remember? – before coming to my senses and turning round and going back into London again.

I think I'd have looked a bit obvious. Maybe you give yourself away by being too interested, by knowing too much about the place, being a city stranger in a country place. They're a bit weird out there, know each other's business too well.

And maybe some other idiot in the gang would have been there too, and the police would notice us glancing at each other or something stupid like that. You can feel guilty even when you aren't, like when you go through customs, even though you don't even have a single packet of cigarettes or bottle of whisky.

I mean, it wasn't me that did it, after all. I was there but it wasn't me.

In the days after, the details faded more, despite the fact I read all I could about it. And you know what? I still wanted to do it again. I think the boss knew that would happen, in time. We were all shocked and quiet immediately after the first attack, disgusted even, and if he'd asked us then, we'd have refused.

But in time, left alone, he knew we would all want to do it again. I guess it is like being rebellious at school, like pushing the teachers... no bad comeback, you do it again. You get a sense of power... able to do things. We're kind of like soldiers. We're in another zone, another place.

So I was pleased when we got the message. We were all there. I guess we were all a little wary of each other at first. Cindy smiled at me, though. I thought, why not? I wasn't seeing anyone else, then.

Once we'd chilled up again, we worked like an oiled clock. We did a couple of jobs in the next week, both small, not too rich or special. More tests, I guess, compared with what came after. Don't want to talk about it too much. Then we had a week gap.

Then we did two more jobs, bigger ones, same MO, families but rich and high-powered. Not enough to have armed guards, though, or us-proof alarms. The first was a senior guy from an American GM company. Genetic modification. These people, you know, they think they can just come over here and pollute the world with their seeds. That's what the boss said. He also said it was a contract from Friends of the Earth, but I didn't believe that. Anyway, as well as killing everyone in the house,

we left calling cards. "For the poor, the impoverished. It's War!" I wasn't so keen on that, maybe it was supposed to make us feel better, but it distracted attention, I guess.

Did another job, this time an oil-company man and, of course, his family. Global warming tax, the boss called it. We had to leave calling cards again, that time accusing the family of profiteering from the destruction of the climate. Also, of course, we took all their wallets and cards and laptops and rings and trinkets and passwords and stuff. We did pretty well from that one. Got paid a lot. I could afford a nice car now.

One problem I expect you heard about, Miss Tyrrall, we killed almost everyone, the granny, the baby, all the pets, their visiting house guest from the States. But we missed the *au pair* from wherever, Greece, I think. Hid in a cupboard or something. The boss went ballistic, but what could he do? Our first witness.

The papers had a field day. It was one of them came up with "Chiller," called us a "Chilled" gang. The *au pair* reported how we looked before we killed her clients, you see. On drugs, expressionless. Cold. Chill. Fits well in a headline. But "chilled"? Sounds like we didn't know to come in out of the cold. We preferred chilled – more like something we did deliberately. Anyway, we were in the papers every day... Well, not us by name, but you know what I mean. It was exciting, sure. Manson II, that was another label.

But again... it was like doing something underwater. It was like being drunk. I wasn't really there. Not like I'm here, now. But after the fuckup and the publicity I was worried the boss was going to pull the plug on us. But no, not yet anyway.

It's a big one, a more complex job, this one. Worth it. An attack on a business meeting of high-ups at one of those fancy country houses where they have corporate strategy meetings and so on. Big prize, pharmaceutical stuff, and we're trusted to pull it off. Different MO, see – as if the other jobs were red herrings.

And just adults. No kids. So when we get our syringes from the boss, I think, if I'm ever going to do it, now's a good chance, see what it's really like, killing people when you can feel their pain.

We dress, in black, freshly washed. Black masks, just our eyes showing, like rioters. The vehicle this time is a blue van with tinted rear windows. We're trusted to see out. The streetlights dance on the sides as we head out of town, somewhere along the M11. Then we park up for a while.

I think all of us are fretting a bit. Kevin bites his lip, like a kid worried about an exam. Beth fiddles with her hair. Jim cracks his knuckles. I shift my bum on the cold van floor. This is an odd job. The timing is strange. More targets, a bigger space. And someone else is watching the target zone for us, deciding the best time to hit. Another team is on, doing the security people and the CCTV. Not chilled though.

We move off, it's time to take the shot. The others do. I go through the motions but pocket my syringe. I feel excited as all hell. The others, they put their heads back, close their eyes. The driver is on the lookout. He doesn't

shoot up, of course... he's got to think of us.

After a while it hits them, one after the other. They look up, look around. And their eyes are cold. It's true. Like blue ice. Suddenly, I'm a bit scared just being with them. I can feel my heart thump, feel cold sweat. Suppose they realize that I'm still fleshing it? Will they kill me? I can see why the boss is wary. Not too late to jab up... but I don't. I've made a decision and want to go through with it.

The van parks up again, we pile out. Security is taken out, as promised. The house is big, comfortable, maybe 200 years old, set in fine gardens. Warm yellow lights blaze at the windows. I can smell wood smoke from a log fire. It smells like Christmas, old Christmases anyway, and suddenly I'd rather be somewhere else.

The targets are mostly all together, in a big lounge, drinking wine and champagne. It's an easy hit; we go in through the door. They're slow, and fuddled. We take their phones easy, they're punched and tied up. So far so good, it's a thrill. I can do it.

Kevin counts them. Shit, one science type missing. He tells me to go find her, bring her here... if she resists, don't kill her unless you have to. We gotta get information from all of the victims. I try to nod dispassionately, like I'm like him, like one of them, but my fucking heart is jumping. I can see the business types are scared, too.

I surprise the missing woman coming out the loo down the corridor. She's blonde, wide-eyed. Try to talk to her politely, but she gets it straight away. Well, you would too, weird nervous guy in a black mask carrying a big knife... She tries to leg it, tugging out her phone. Runs into the enormous kitchen. Shit. I follow. If I'd been on chiller I'd have slashed her, but I mess up, drop the knife, knock her over. She smashes her head against the door jamb as she goes down, drops the phone, she's dazed. Thank fuck for that.

But there's worse. A couple of old bags in the kitchen, staring at me as I fumble on the floor for my knife. And a bloody kid, mouth open, staring. Who the hell are you? Cooks, cooks! they say. I don't know about them, they're not part of the plan. What should I do? Get out! I yell. But one of them picks up a cleaver, looks like she might attack me. Idiot!

I'm in a bit of a panic by now. You'd be too. The woman is coming round. Mum, she says, please don't kill me, she says. I don't know what to do so I knee her in the face but the bony crunch is sickening. I can barely think. Get out! Get out! I'm screaming to myself. I should go, I can't hack it. Then Kevin comes in, through the other door. He sizes the situation up. He points to me. Put her with the others.

They're only cooks, I gasp. Kevin looks at me, a bit weird. I mean for him to let them go, they have nothing, but he doesn't give a shit, he slices one. I don't know what to do. He tells me to get gone. I go. I can hear the shrieks as Kevin finishes off the kid and the other woman.

I want to take a shit, I'm shaking like a leaf by this time. I can't work like this. I can't work like this. It's too late to jab up, it won't kick in in time. There's no way out. I push my mark back into the main room, roughly. I can smell her fear, sweat under her blouse. I can taste it on my tongue.

They're all tied up. Two are already dead, their stuff

being packed up. They're 30-somethings, perhaps with kids. One minute, having a good time drinking wine in deep sofas surrounded by paintings of fat old men in red coats chasing foxes, the next they've crossed over into death. They already know what it's like on the other side and all their laptops and PhDs and Amex cards couldn't help them. I can't look. Another guy is spilling the beans. Cindy's over the other side, saying to him, yes, tell us, and you won't die like these guys. Hold out, and you will. He's talking, his tongue is loosened. The others are wide-eyed with fear, but they're ready to talk too.

I get my woman to sit down, tie her up, but I can hardly do it, my fingers are numbed and wobbly. Why doesn't she fight back? But she's practically fainted, she's out of it, can hardly see us. I splash her with water, at least I think it was water, perhaps it was champagne.

The interrogation continues. As well as the usual credit card details, the boss is after safe combinations, financial info, insider stuff, anything really, but mainly drug formulas. Their files are there, dumped into sacks. Some great anti-cancer drug, the boss is going to pirate it. Or his boss. Or someone. Payoff for the guy who labbed him chiller, maybe. I don't understand that stuff. Steve does. He knows what he has to get. He can work well under chiller, keeps his head. I think he's pretty chillered naturally.

Finally my woman is up enough for talking. She sees that if she cooperates, she won't be killed. She has lots to tell, apparently; she's some kind of project scientist with all sorts of good stuff on her laptop. Steve's happy.

Then we're ready to go. The remaining poor saps look like they're relieved, they made it. But of course they haven't, not when the Chillered gang is hitting them. Cindy waves over, signing I should top my woman. It's the moment of truth, and of course I can't do it. I can't put my knife in among the muscles and sinews and voice-box and gristle of her neck, I can't plunge it into her jelly eye or her heart or anywhere.

I just can't.

I say something, I dunno, that I'm not feeling well. Cindy can do it. She comes over. And this is weird – my scientist stares at Cindy and makes a soundless word with her mouth: Cindy? it is I saw later. But Cindy's away with the fairies, she plays with the woman, cuts the scientist's ear first, then traces a line down her arm and blouse, cutting deep. The woman screams and cries and snot dribbles from her nose. I look away, say, for fuck's sake Cindy! Let's go!

So Cindy slices the woman's throat. She can see it happening in front of her, she can see she is dying and all she's ever done and ever wanted to do is pouring away like water from a bombed dam and will be gone in seconds, for ever. It's all I can do not to throw up. Meanwhile Kevin is doing one of the other guys, smiling absently to himself. And Steve, I don't want to say what he's doing. He has a thing about genitals. His guy dies in pain. A hell of a lot of pain. And they're all gone now.

Kevin throws down some more cards. Something to do with global pharmaceutical companies and the evil practices they do in Africa, testing their drugs on poor people before trying them out on Westerners.

Revenge of Africa, we were called that night.
Every job a different cause, eh, Miss Tyrrall?

Back in the van, I didn't want anyone to look at me. I guess we normally each do someone. But Kevin did at least four this time, maybe more. And I did none. I kind of stick out. When you're there, doing it, seeing it done, it's disgusting. The others, they were like zombies. I could see they weren't really seeing, weren't really feeling.

There was blood all over us. I felt drained, disgusted. But, Miss Tyrrall, at least I knew I couldn't kill without the drug. I just couldn't do it. It wasn't in me.

I didn't want to kill again. But how to get out, get away from these nutters?

The others came down quicker this time. I noticed that before, it getting quicker. Seems to be wearing off. Or perhaps it's smaller doses. Anyway, they stopped being super-cool and started looking like kids again. Weird. Even Steve.

But Cindy, she starts crying, shaking, like she can't stop. This was more than coming down off a high, though. She turns to me, quiet, pale, shocked. That woman I killed – it was Megan. Mom's sister. My aunt.

Jeez. And she even played with her before killing her.

You'd think that's not supposed to happen, she could get recognized or bottle out or something. But turned out the boss knew. That's how they became a target.

And I sort of knew what I'd have to do. We can't just go on killing like this. Like it's not us. It's not right. Where's it going to stop? I tell you where – the boss is going to set a new chilled gang on us one day, or something. Do away with us all in some basement. It's kill or be killed. I've got to get out. I've got to kill him.

But we've just found I can't kill without help, haven't we? But I still had my chiller shot.

I timed it right, no problem. We were parked up in town, another new safe house. Muswell Hill. Cindy was still sniffing, in shock. The rest of us didn't like to say anything, but I think we all felt it was the end of something. It's real people. Not a dream. Not a movie made by other people who weren't there.

Chiller kicks in.

The boss opens the door, looks round. You guess he is a bit complacent, now. He sees most of them are coming down. But he notices that you have not. His eyes narrow as he looks at you.

You know what you decided to do as you stand and pull your knife. But Cindy shrieks at the boss about her aunt. Hush. You wish she wouldn't, it will make things hard. And the bodyguard blocks her. She is crying, wailing; it is an irritating, distracting noise. You have to think, quickly. But Kevin has hold of your knife arm, his eyes wide. You stop him hard, efficiently. And Cindy's in the way, wailing. You silence her, too hard. The boss's bodyguard is slow, he pulls a gun. You cut his arm, he drops the gun. Steve flails at you without a weapon, he's mouthing stuff you can't hear. He is not thinking. You waste time turning and hitting him.

Beth and Jim are gone. The boss and his bodyguard

are gone too. This is not supposed to happen.

You wanted to kill the boss, but it's a big mess and you're in the middle of it with the dead bodies of two people you know. So you run too.

What can I say? It didn't work out how I wanted. But you were right, Miss Tyrrall, it is good to get it off my chest. Get my ducks in a row. Confession is good for the soul, eh?

What now? Now, I want and need chiller, but I'm a little scared of it and anyway, I can't get it now, can I? Would I take it if I could get any? Dunno. If only I could've killed the boss then and there, as a man, with my eyes and ears open, maybe things would be better. Maybe I'd be some kind of a hero. Maybe Cindy would still be alive. But I'm not, I'm stuck here with you.

But you know, I still gotta get him. It's too late for Cindy and Kevin, and too bad for Mrs Ayres' cat, but I'm working on it, I'm learning. I'm teaching myself to kill without chiller, you see.

Sorry, Miss Tyrrall. It's in a good cause.

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Nicholas Waller's previous stories here were "The Travel Agent" (IZ 130), "Frame by Frame" (IZ 138), "Vanguard" (IZ 142) and "Sandtrap" (IZ 187). A peripatetic publicist (and storyboard assistant on the movie *An American Werewolf in Paris*), he divides his time between France and Somerset.

interzone

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Far back in the mists of time, before men had walked on the moon, before Monty Python, before Douglas Adams, there were those of us who walked the face of this planet and craved entertainment. Particularly, we of "B" watch, at the London Air Traffic Control Centre, were determined that if we were going to have to spend Saturday night together, it would have to be worthwhile. We worked a four-day watch rota that meant that once every four days we finished work at 8.00pm and had to be back at the Centre at 8.00am the next day – and once a month this fell on a Saturday.

Of course, by the time we had left the Centre and had something to eat, it was far too late to go to the regular cinema, so we went to the pub. However, they always had a late night horror double bill on Saturdays at the big cinema in Hounslow. We would pile in there, about 20 of us, by now quite pickled, and be treated to some of the best of the movies that came from the Hammer stable. They were already a cult, and, old and new alike, were trotted out on this regular basis for our delectation with little regard for their age. And we lapped them up. They were happy days, made all the happier by these movies.

It comes as something of a surprise to discover just how long they continued making these films, and more of a surprise to see how trashy they look now. *Blood Beast Terror*, *Witchfinder General*, *The Devil Rides Out*, they still raise shivers despite looking so dated. It is hardly surprising, then, that they are becoming a cult to a new generation, alongside the equally unlikely *Carry On* films.

It is probable that it is because these movies are remembered with

Quatermass and beyond

Evelyn Lewes

such affection by my generation that they are being successfully relaunched into the marketplace, with my contemporaries buying them for their children and even grandchildren. Of course, such a nostalgic glow can be completely destroyed by re-exposure to its original cause, so it was with a mixture of trepidation and glee that I shucked these two classic movies out of their new cellophane wrappers and popped them into the DVD player.

I should say that the DVDs themselves are anything but trashy. There are full colour booklets included with stills from the movies, extended essays about the making of the films, potted histories of Hammer Studios, and on the DVD itself lots of interesting extras including a newly shot interview with Val Guest. But the films themselves!

The Quatermass Xperiment is a wonderful tour-de-force. Carroon's predicament is so reminiscent of the *Frankenstein* monster that I wonder if there wasn't at least an unconscious echo of it in Nigel Kneale's mind, as there is in the cover picture of Victor Carroon (superbly played by Richard Wordsworth) with his cadaverous face, sitting plainly being experimented on electrically. It is also notable that although Brian Donlevy and Jack Warner star, it is Wordsworth's face that dominates all the publicity for this film.

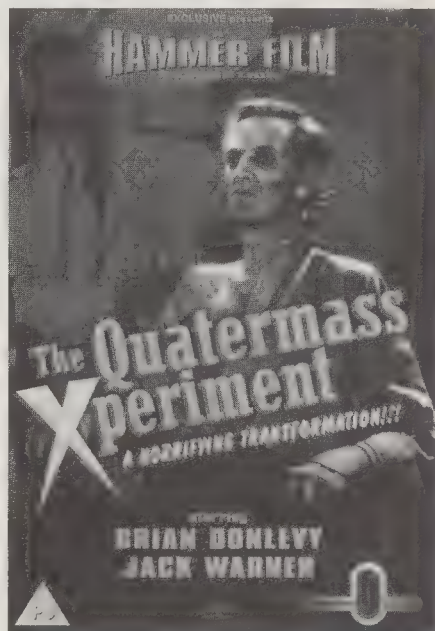
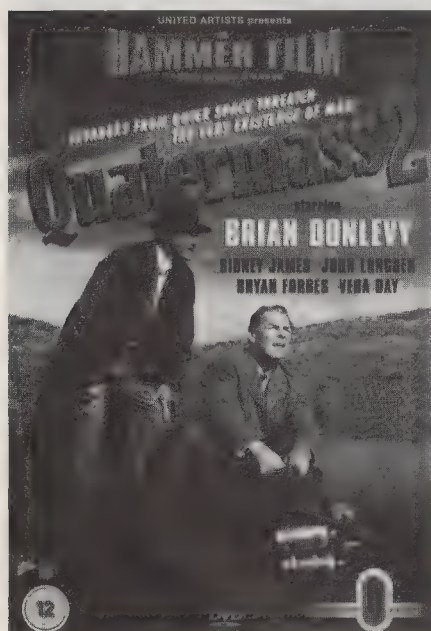
It would be invidious to expect too much of the screenplay. The actors use a demotic speech that has not been heard much since the beginning of the 1960s, although I can vouch from memory that people really did speak in this way. And, of course, it wouldn't be a horror movie if someone didn't die spectacularly. But Nigel Kneale's work has always sprawled uncomfortably across the boundary between science fiction and horror, and the scientific

side of this, which is essentially a monster story, is creditably well done.

Finally, the shooting of many of the exteriors against a backdrop of the ruins of the blitz-torn East End of London gives the film both a documentary/realistic feel and an objective correlative to the destruction that is going on inside Carroon. Far from undermining my memories, this film appears to me to be altogether better than when I first saw it, and I am very grateful to have it on DVD.

The other movie here can only suffer in comparison to its superb precursor. *Quatermass II* is plainly made to cash in on the success of the first film and equally plainly does not have such a powerful story – but only in comparison to the original. If it had had a more inventive title (and it should be noted that although the DVD box shows the title as *Quatermass2*, the entire booklet and all the illustrations show the title with the roman numerals) and not had the first movie to live up to, this would still have been a good film. Given a different set of public paranoia about government's secret projects, nuclear power stations, and invasion from outer space; and further superb location shootings in a genuine industrial setting, the story is skilfully handled again by Kneale to bring about another breathtaking conclusion. Plainly, while Nigel Kneale's involvement makes these Hammer productions a cut above their other more shlocky stablemates, the glow of remembrance of Hammer's whole *oeuvre* is thus far undiminished and I am looking forward with considerable appetite to seeing more of the films I used to enjoy so much in the 1960s. And perhaps along the way I'll get to catch up on some of the ones that got away.

Evelyn Lewes



Why Science Fiction (Thank Goodness!) Still Doesn't Get Any Respect

Two years ago, at a science fiction conference in Hong Kong, several speakers bemoaned the low status of the newly conspicuous genre of science fiction in China. We heard that Chinese colleges and universities were resisting the inclusion of science fiction in their literature classes, that Chinese science fiction stories were never considered for major literary awards, that Chinese science fiction writers found it difficult to secure financial support, and that Chinese science fiction novels were rarely reviewed in the mainstream press.

We were told, in other words, that Chinese science fiction was not getting any respect.

Still, the speakers seemed hopeful that they could soon persuade their literary colleagues to abandon their narrow-minded attitudes and embrace science fiction. Based on the American experience, however, I can discern no reason for such optimism. Today, over half a century after "science fiction" first emerged as an integral part of American popular culture, a preponderance of prominent voices continue to maintain that all science fiction is basically garbage.

One recent example: in the May 18, 2003 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*, one Sven Birkerts begins a review of Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* with these remarks: "I am going to stick my neck out and just say it: science fiction will never be Literature with a capital 'L,' and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character. It sacrifices moral and psychological nuance in favour of more conceptual matters, and elevates scenario over sensibility." While magnanimously willing to concede that there are "Probably" some "exceptions to my categorical pronouncement," Birkerts concludes that there are not "enough of them to overturn it." When this nonsense was shared with members of the Fiction-mags listserv, one prominent science fiction writer responded that he found

it all very depressing.

But why? Such learned "pronouncements" may be surprising and unsettling to Chinese science fiction writers, but they should be old news to American science fiction writers, having regularly appeared for over fifty years. They were silly and wrong in the 1950s, and they are silly and wrong now, but that has never prevented most members of the literary elite from clinging to these risible opinions, all evidence to the contrary. Could any American really entertain the plausible expectation that the recent emergence of yet another group of science fiction writers with indisputable talent, and the recent publications of yet another set of science fiction novels of indisputable literary merit, would finally cause these people to change their minds?

Part of the problem, I think, is an imperfect recognition of what is really involved in showing respect to forms of literature. People typically regard the gestures that define such respect to writers – like favourable reviews in major literary periodicals like *The New York Times Book Review*, prestigious awards, invitations to give speeches or readings at literature conferences, foundation grants to work on new projects, books assigned in college literature classes, or appointments as visiting professors of creative writing – as matters of *recognition*: the nabobs of literature are constantly on the lookout for works of superior literature, and eager to bestow all due praise on its exemplars. So, it is consequently baffling why they so consistently overlook or belittle science fiction despite its increasingly obvious virtues.

However, these gestures are actually best construed as means of *finan-*

cial support. In some cases, money is overtly transferred to the writer, as with grants, honorariums for conference appearances, or salaried faculty positions; in other cases, money may be an indirect result, since the honour of a glowing review in a respected journal or a story chosen for a "Year's Best" anthology will increase a writer's chance to obtain financial benefits. Virtually all of the writers now esteemed by experts in literature with a capital L, even those rare success stories like Atwood who no longer need the cash, underwent an apprenticeship of humble dependence upon such largesse. And if the sought-after "respect" from the literary establishment is viewed in these crude terms – as money given to needy writers or formerly needy writers – the persistent exclusion of science fiction becomes more understandable.

Charitable people like to give money to the people who need it the most. The common perception is that science fiction writers earn a reasonable income from their work and hence aren't particularly in need of money. The common perception is that poets, and writers of similarly uncommercial prose, do not earn a reasonable income from their work and hence may be desperately in need of money. Granted, such perceptions are not entirely accurate: there are more than enough science fiction writers bitterly complaining about harsh marketplace conditions and inadequate compensation, and there are probably some poets out there who manage to cobble together a fairly respectable income from various sources. But it is probably fair enough to say that a major American science fiction writer will almost invariably make much more money than an American poet of comparable stature. A couple of years ago, for instance, a distinguished American poet named Alan Shapiro won the Kingsley Tufts Award, the most lucrative prize for poetry in the world; when interviewed about how the

Gary Westfahl

award would change his life, Shapiro remarked that he could now finally afford to purchase his own home. Somehow, I suspect that modern winners of major science fiction awards were already in a position to purchase their own homes if they chose.

So, when science fiction writers complain that their work isn't receiving the respect it deserves, they are – fairly or not – greeted with the same scorn that people in tuxedos and evening gowns would receive if they drove up to the Salvation Army in a limousine and asked for a free meal. Why do you, Mr or Ms Science Fiction Writer, want reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, foundation grants, Pulitzer Prizes, or stories in *The Best American Short Stories 2003*? You are already earning a decent income as a writer; the people we typically honour are rarely so fortunate. Literary snobs may not articulate, or even be fully aware of, this impulse to reward those most in need of rewards that guides their thinking, but it's a matter of human nature: give food to a starving man, and you see heartwarming gratitude in his eyes; give food to a sated glutton, and you are greeted with disheartening indifference.

Closely linked to financial considerations in the bestowing of literary respect, of course, is the influence of the old boys' – today, the old girls' and old boys' – network. Aspiring young writers are trained in Creative Writing classes to produce certain sorts of highly esteemed but unpopular writing; the more talented and energetic of these publish widely but unprofitably in little magazines that pay in copies, garnering some attention in the right circles; after receiving more and more recognition from the people that matter, they work their way up to positions as book reviewers, literary advisers to the Ford Foundation, members of the National Book Awards committee, and so on; and they naturally single out writers like themselves for their prizes and honours, just as they were once singled out by other writers like themselves. This explains why even the most successful of literary writers will continue to receive awards and recognition, even when they are in a position to disdain them, or even when their works have visibly deteriorated in quality.

So, if earning literary respect is simply a matter of evidencing genuine poverty and working one's way into an incestuous subculture, why have science fiction writers been so spectacularly unsuccessful in learning how to play the game? Many science fiction writers as noted can persuasively present themselves as impoverished, and they usually have the necessary

social skills to make an impression on the literary set.

The problem is that, at least during the mandatory period of apprenticeship, it requires massive amounts of grovelling to obtain the benefits of literary respect, and science fiction writers, even if they aren't rolling in dough at the moment, may find it quite difficult to grovel. Unlike poets and playwrights, they are members of a profession where it is commonplace to earn a decent living from one's craft, and only a certain type of personality can happily endure a career of begging – and, make no mistake about it, writers essentially without an audience trying to survive by means of influential friends, part-time teaching jobs, and grants are necessarily involved in a career of begging. In my experience, science fiction writers generally aren't very good at it.

Consider, for example, a university planning to hold a writers' conference that has enough funds to attract a well-known writer (typically, money to cover the writer's airfare, meals, and lodging, along with a modest honorarium, perhaps somewhere between \$500 and \$1000). Let's say that the committee's choice has come down to two finalists: a major poet, like Alan Shapiro, and a major science fiction writer, like Gregory Benford. They will choose Shapiro every time.

Why? In the first place, when you invite someone to attend an event, you want to do so with a reasonable expectation that the person you approach will say yes. With a major poet, this is virtually guaranteed: you are offering him a free vacation and the equivalent of two weeks' salary, which he will eagerly claim. The only time he might say no would be in the extremely improbable case that he had already been offered a better deal to visit another university at the same time.

The major science fiction writer, however, is more likely to decline. The money and the travel will probably not be important to him. If the conference sounds interesting, if it happens to be taking place in a city that he would like to visit for other reasons, if he doesn't have anything better to do, he may agree to attend; but there is an equal probability that he will turn down the offer, forcing the committee to look for another candidate.

Further, the two types of writers will behave differently at a university conference. The poet will attend every single speech, every single reading, and every single panel, maintaining a fixed facial expression of eager attentiveness at every moment. At the opening reception, he will happily stand for hours listening to some graduate student expounding her idi-

otic theory of poetry, nodding thoughtfully and periodically interjecting some comment to communicate that he is really listening to her. He is very eager to be invited to another conference, or to be invited back to this conference, and who knows? That wretched writer whose reading he politely sits through may two years later be in charge of his own conference; that graduate student at the reception may serve as the student representative on the committee that plans next year's conference. That is why, in every respect, the poet will strive to be an absolutely perfect guest; beggars always do.

The science fiction writer, however, will not be an absolutely perfect guest. Oh, he will perform every duty that he is being paid to perform, showing up promptly for every event he is supposed to participate in. But when he isn't on the programme, he might wander away to do something else he'd rather be doing. He will not be unfailingly polite and agreeable; confronted with a graduate student's idiotic theories, he might tell her quite bluntly that she's an idiot and then walk out of the reception to meet some old friends for dinner and drinks. Unlike a major poet, a major science fiction writer will feel no obligation to grovel, and he may leave the conference having made more enemies than friends. And he won't care – because, unlike the poet, he is already making good money from his writing career or expects to do so in the future; he doesn't need the crumbs being tossed out by universities and foundations.

So, when will science fiction finally receive the literary respect that so many feel it deserves? It will happen when science fiction loses most of its audience; when science fiction is no longer profitable, even for the most prolific or the very best of writers; when all science fiction writers will necessarily get down on their knees in hopes of receiving whatever boons they can from the literary establishment in order to stay alive. And once they assume that position, science fiction writers will finally be perceived as persons worthy of literary approbation.

Or, in other words, science fiction will receive respect when it is dying.

Thus, we should view the shameful disrespect long accorded to science fiction as a tremendously gratifying compliment to the genre's continuing vitality and broad popular appeal.

Unlike poetry and the other forms of literature with a capital L which garner all that *respect*, science fiction has *readers*.

Why on Earth should it instead want respect?

Gary Westfahl

White Bizango (PS Publishing; hardback £25, paperback £10) is Stephen Gallagher's return to the terrain he has previously explored in novels such as *Down River*, *Nightmare*, *with Angel*, and *Red, Red Robin*. Gallagher's nightmare country is not one of apocalyptic visions and collapsing societies. Less ostentatiously, his fiction explores the ragged edges of contemporary norms, fastening onto desires that shade into delusion or obsession. When worldviews collide, sometimes at first in seemingly quiet, everyday ways, then the dark matter of Gallagher's suspense fiction is in place. And as different characters' understandings of "reality" start to spiral away from one another, then the psychological power of Gallagher's storytelling becomes dazzlingly evident. Suspense isn't always about having a man with a gun burst into the room. It can just as well be created by a clash of beliefs, by one character's inability to reach another, or one person's failure to understand another. And Gallagher's brand of dark fantasy/suspense always holds a highly-charged emotional core, whether it is dealing with revenge fantasy (*Oktober*), familial loss (*Rain*), or even the matter of a best-friend-turned-psychotic (*Down River*).

John Lafcadio, the cop hero of *White Bizango*, is a characteristic Gallagher creation. First-person narration suits Gallagher's writing, allowing his wry, cynical, and always observant authorial voice to mesh with a lead character's perspective. Lafcadio, like Jim Harper of *Oktober*, is a figure down on his luck who seeks to turn this misfortune around. And like Alex Volchak, the protagonist of *Valley of Lights*, Lafcadio is a police professional caught up in strange events, as the police procedural is sent spinning off towards horror genre territory. Unlike *Valley of Lights*, however, this new short novel (or extended novella) reserves no space for the supernatural. As such, it continues Gallagher's literary trajectory away from dark fantasy and into crime/suspense fiction. In *White Bizango*, voodoo is the stuff of horror that begins to inhabit cop fiction, but it's voodoo as a belief system and a set of practices that concerns Gallagher and troubles John Lafcadio, not zombies, spirits or curses. Everything that happens in this police case has a resolutely rational explanation, it would seem, although the slightest of loopholes appears via Lafcadio's ultimate fate. Genre conventions can occasionally disrupt plausibility or verisimilitude, and here Gallagher covers our necessary suspension of disbelief with the implication that Vodoun faith has assisted Lafcadio in his greatest moment of need.

John Lafcadio's professionalism is

Voodoo and Visions

Matt Hills

pitted against the voodoo rites and beliefs of West Louisiana locals, as a conman known by the moniker of Legendre aims to exploit local faith and aspirations. Given that a "bizango" is a secret society of voodoo practitioners who are available for hire, it is Legendre who forms the one-man white (as in Caucasian) bizango of the title. Gallagher plays a few storytelling tricks with his white man black-hat character, using limited, first-person perspective to excellent effect and building to a finale that integrates plot strands with entertaining verve. By posing the question of whether or not Legendre can live up to his name – just what powers might the man may have? – Gallagher depicts his villain as caught up in a fantasy of omnipotence. Legendre is an absent and implied threat for much of the narrative, but this lurking absence is



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atmospherically effective. And as Legendre's "powers" are gradually called into doubt, *White Bizango* explores and exploits the character's dislocated self-image, showing us a petty chancer cloaked in horror's fantasies of spirit possession. Gallagher also makes the relationship between Lafcadio and Legendre an intensely personal one by having Lafcadio fall victim to one of the criminal's more potent voodoo tricks, and this opening – a wonderfully crafted set-up that occupies the first three chapters – provides the necessary psychological impetus to Lafcadio's pursuit of Legendre.

Lafcadio's link to Legendre is complicated by his relationship with another of the conman's victims, Julie Boudreaux. What could have been a romantic subplot involving Lafcadio and Julie is instead defused into a sense of what happens when people simply muddle through in their everyday lives. This plot strand is handled without the zealous idealism that seems to carry much popular genre fiction: there is no "love will conquer all" juvenilia on show in Lafcadio's world, but neither is there an exaggerated, *noirish* world-weariness. Instead, moments of energetic wit abound, as events that the reader expects are thrown out of alignment, and threatening images of voodoo are recontextualized as black farce. One particular character, Johnny Dodds, serves Gallagher especially well in this regard, provoking a number of confusions that generate suspense but resolve, potentially, into moments of comedic coincidence and misinterpretation.

What is especially intriguing about *White Bizango* is its creation and use of a Cult Crime Co-ordination Unit known as the voodoo cops (whom Gal-





lagger is at pains to distinguish from an *X-Files*-style set-up). The voodoo cops help save Lafcadio, and also help give this work much of its idiosyncratic colour and flavour.

Reviewers elsewhere (David Howe in *Shivers*, Sandy Auden in *The Third Alternative* and Paul Brazier in passing in *Interzone* 188) have concluded that if *White Bizango* needs a generic label, then it should be classified under "crime fiction" or as a "police procedural." And yes, it is those things. But it's also generically trickier, though without becoming tricky. In Gallagher's earlier novel *Valley of Lights* corpses come back to life through paranormal, monstrous means: *White Bizango* and its voodoo cops investigate the same narrative possibilities and confront the same images, but they do so in fully rationalist terms. It is as if Gallagher has preserved the shock tropes of horror fiction, while nevertheless genre-shifting them. This tale feels like dark fantasy in spirit and crime fiction in execution. It's certainly not a generic hybrid in the mode of *Valley of Lights*, but neither does it quite read like "straight" crime fiction, eventually coming to resemble an exercise in generic latency. In other words, it doesn't obviously fuse genres, but rather plays a kind of shell game, hiding the effects of one (latent) genre, Russian doll-style, inside another (manifest) frame.

There is no doubting the tension that is built up across the events of *White Bizango*, and I defy any reader not to feel compelled to read on when confronted with chapter endings that expertly throw out new information, create new plot puzzles and introduce new levels of threat. Indeed, Joe R. Lansdale refers to the tension-creating quality of Gallagher's writing in his introduction, also citing the rhythm of Gallagher's prose as one of the author's strengths. Sure enough, an insistent, immersive rhythm is very much on show here, both at the level of plotting and at the level of specific sentences and turns of phrase. *White Bizango* may not tackle the dystopic fall of civilizations, but its small, psychologically intricate revolutions are no less about power. As Lafcadio puts it, perhaps prematurely, but at a pivotal moment in his struggle with the mythic Legendre: "And it was then that I knew I had him" (p141).

Tim Lebbon's *White and Other Tales of Ruin* (Night Shade Books; paperback \$15, hardback \$27, limited edition \$60), is a collection of six novellas, two of which – "Hell" and "Mannequin Man and the Plastic Bitch" – are original to this publication. The British Fantasy Award-winning "White" leads off the collection after Jack Ketchum's introduction,

and sets the tone for much of what follows. As in the fiction of Stephen Gallagher, Lebbon pays close attention to realizing character and to developing psychological conflict. But unlike Gallagher, Lebbon's focus is simultaneously claustrophobic and epic in scale: we see characters in extreme situations, but these small-scale events are recurrently placed in the context of overarching societal chaos.

"White" takes its title not from matters of ethnicity, as does *White Bizango*, but rather from the camouflaged entities that have trapped a group of people in an old house in Cornwall. These "Whites" cannot be seen clearly against Christmas snow, and are never conclusively identified as aliens, ghosts, or any other kind of established fantastic creature, making them a suitably blank projective space for reader and characters alike. There is no doubting the threat posed by these "things" though, and Lebbon details a fight to the death between a motley band of humans (as these sorts of groups are usually called) and the viciously predatory Whites. Given its enclosed, snowbound setting, this novella is greatly atmospheric, breathing much new life into the phrase "when hell freezes over."

Doom-laden visions of destruction, decay and degeneracy hang over most of these novellas, as civilization's collapse approaches, or as humanity's end seems at hand. Lebbon's work, full of stark and painful images, does not make for cheery reading. "White," "From Bad Flesh" and "The Origin of Truth" all deal with apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenarios, the last being more obviously science-fictional in tone, and focusing on the disastrous escape of nanotechnology into the environment. Meanwhile, "The First Law" concerns shipwrecked sailors fighting for survival, and is a stinging tale with a savage, grim conclusion.

As Lebbon makes clear in his story notes, each of the novellas here can be viewed as happening in the same shattered future world, a world that faces, or has faced, "the Ruin." However, this linkage is not really made explicit across the different stories, and their connections remain primarily thematic and tonal. Dealing with such bleak subject matter, it might be supposed that Lebbon's work lacks a lighter side. Presumably, then, it is no accident that the final novella in the collection, "Mannequin Man and the Plastic Bitch," offers the most positive and hopeful scenario. This novella deals with two "artificial," Tom and Honey. Tom has been given a "love virus" by a mad inventor and Honorary Professor of Sentience known only as the Baker. And fall in love is what Tom eventually does, with Honey the plastic prostitute. A fantas-

tic parable of sorts, "Mannequin Man..." injects a dose of rose-tinted, loved-up optimism into the proceedings, suggesting that the Baker's virus may get out into the world and do away with the scourges of meaning-less hedonism and commodified sex. Like its fellows, this is a beautifully written and fast-paced novella crammed full of striking ideas and images, not least of which is the fact that Tom has to literally deflate the love of his life, roll her up and carry her away like so much luggage. The "plastic bitch" can be resurrected, but this process may not leave her unscathed. On the run from Honey's pimp, Tom and his beloved baggage need help from the Baker.

Lebbon's six novellas gathered here are often most interesting for what they *don't* reveal: the Baker is an intriguing creation buried in the past of "Mannequin Man..." just as "the Ruin" is variously alluded to in different novellas without really ever being made fully present as subject matter. Key characters and world-breaking events thus trace shady histories around and behind the incidents and narratives that are pushed centre-stage, if anything, making "the Ruin" more terrifying than were we to confront it head-on. In this, Lebbon's work represents a poetics of absence, a series of melancholic talismans for "post-" times.

If love is all that can redeem the afterwards of "the Ruin," as in the concluding novella, it's worth remembering that this is nevertheless a scientifically constructed version of *amour*. Natural passion doesn't come to the rescue against bio-augmented and artificial beings: it is yet more science that provides answers. And even in the face of mankind's extinction via tech-gone-wrong in "The Origin of Truth," Lebbon still has his characters debate and recognize the value of scientific knowledge. Science may create problems, but it is still part of the solution for Lebbon, still a source of hope, however inchoate, obscurantist or vague.

In fact, alongside science, it's nature that is often the foe to be faced in these novellas. "The First Law" depicts natural mutations as a source of threat, and characters in "From Bad Flesh" treat humans amorally as a natural resource, with profoundly questionable results. In each case, humanity has to face nature, or accept that it is not, after all, cut off from nature. Lebbon's (post-)apocalyptic scenes consistently raise the question of what is left when social/cultural routines and defences break down. Stripped down and confronted by nature's force, humanity is reduced to its most primal will-to-power, fighting to do nothing more than survive.

Despite making use of "abused sci-



ence" and "revenge of nature" apocalyptic modes, Lebbon most definitely champions the magic of science in the book's closing novella when the Mannequin Man and Plastic Bitch upload love's e-message. Encountering the idea that engineered love may just conquer all at the end of so much exquisitely and acutely rendered anguish, it becomes slightly difficult to take seriously. But Lebbon also scatters bright chinks of sentiment elsewhere: a family face death together in "The Origin of Truth" and a father

enters Hell to rescue his daughter in the less imaginatively entitled "Hell." This last-mentioned novella is probably the most action-oriented of all the pieces collected together in *White and...* It careers from incident to incident, beginning as one character's depressive odyssey, and becoming an old-fashioned adventure story shot through with Lebbon's imaginative tics. Tourists are bussed through Hell, supposedly so that they can learn to appreciate their lots in life, but this is a coach trip with a twist. "Hell" seems

slightly *Twilight Zone*-esque in its combination of fantasy and moralism, but as one might expect from Lebbon, it is far harder-hitting, as well as displaying a confident and satisfying lack of explanation. What both *White Bizango* and *White and Other Tales of Ruin* demonstrate, in their different ways, is that UK and US-based specialist publishers are continuing to effectively showcase work from major writers of dark suspense and dystopic fantasy.

Matt Hills

Cities have played a prominent role of late in fantastic fiction, providing the pivotal focus for China Miéville's dystopic vision of New Crobuzon and the floating city-state of *The Scar*, Jeff VanderMeer's haunted history of Ambergris or the subterranean *Veniss Underground*, and the confined yet limitless avenue of Paul Di Filippo's "A Year in the Linear City." In each of these novels or novellas an urban setting has assumed the role of silent partner, visible, in the background, without dialogue or active part, but often overshadowing the characters as well as the narrative's identity. Its omnipresence defines the fiction, and in many respects each city occupies the place of a central character. Such a device is not entirely original, either for fiction or fantasy: one need only think of M. John Harrison's *Viriconium*, Tibor Déry's *X*, Lia Wainstein's *Cittabella*, Dickens's London or earlier fictions concerning legendary cities to recognize the long tradition such urban conceits have had within the literary imagination. But their recent prominence has formed the basis for some of the most significant work published in fantasy over the past couple years, almost becoming an identifying staple for more cutting-edge genre fiction.

K. J. Bishop's *The Etched City* (Prime Press, \$16.95) joins this number. A first novel, it quickly establishes itself amongst its contemporaries through its use of a highly imagined, metropolitan setting as its central focus. Exotic and decadent, terraced in luxury and squalor, Ashamoil exists as a juncture between civilization and the jungle that surrounds it, in its mystery and spectral imagery possessing tenuous echoes of Jeff VanderMeer's *Ambergris*. And like VanderMeer, Bishop uses the setting of her novel as a pervasive presence whose very immanence, at once ephemeral and surreal yet seeming all too imaginatively tangible, informs and influences the entire narrative, both characters and action alike. Nor is this the only feature Ms. Bishop shares with VanderMeer – or for that matter, Miéville – skilfully weaving metaphor and surreal symbolism

Urban Myths

William Thompson

throughout a narrative that continually defies convention while at the same time recognizing and perverting it, blurring genre lines, pushing the boundaries of what is expected, counterpoising marvels against grim realities in a perpetual metamorphosis that enrapt the reader in wonder over what will happen next.

In keeping with her defiance of casual stereotypes, this novel opens deceptively as a fairly conventional adventure, if set within a broadly Western context, complete with six-guns, wide-brim hats and domino. Camels have replaced horses, and there is a sense of after-the-apocalypse that conjures a vague impression of humanity in decay and a desolation reminiscent of George Miller's cinematic visions. But we have shoot-outs and desperadoes on the run displayed within a dusty reality that Sergio Leone would have admired. And the first part of the novel, on its surface, little prepares the reader for the abrupt change which is about to occur.

Fifty-three pages into the novel the narrative shifts from its original desert setting to the lush, tropical locale of Ashamoil, a city as steeped in mystery, beauty and monstrosity as the novel's former setting was stripped down to stark and gritty realities. One quickly realizes that the story's opening was a setup, a contrast of opposition and intentional misdirection to which the author will return at

the end. Comparatively a paradise, protean in possibilities, Ashamoil offers the novel's two protagonists a refuge and an opportunity to start over, a chance to recreate themselves that proves only partially successful. Like the lush jungle that encloses the city, the streets of Ashamoil contain both beauty and menace in equal abundance, and the author continues her pairings of opposition and dichotomies throughout the narrative, dividing the stories of her two lead characters into separate if parallel storylines, subtly informing each other through divergence. Other threads and characters appear—the fallen priest, the artist seeking transformation through rendering evil, a hoodlum in love with a woman he has largely imagined—each seeking redemption and metamorphosis through reflections of what they are not. And the catalyst of their search is a hired killer, a man who in the purity of his evil has attained a kind of grace: the deadly beauty of a predator.

This is a challenging novel, both in the themes and questions it subtly poses, and the metaphors it disguises indivisibly amidst beauty and monstrosity. Traditional symbols, such as the Sangréal, are perverted, and the two mythic beasts that serve to identify the novel are the Sphinx, with its deadly riddles, and the Basilisk, whose gaze petrifies and cannot bear to look on itself. And two better avatars for this novel could not have been chosen, as riddles abound, both over the story's development as well as in its strange and marvellous anecdotal asides, and too close an examination of the narrative's contents are certain to glean unsettling insights. An amazing first novel, not only for the skill of writing, complexity and richness of invention it displays, but also for the themes it is willing to confront. At one point during the novel one of the characters addresses the loss of the numinous, and suggests we are creating an inert world: "[thus we] make numinous phenomena of ourselves." Exactly!

In *Angelica* (Ace, \$23.95) religious fantasist Sharon Shinn returns to



her fictive locale of Samaria, the quasi-Judaeo-Christian realm that provided the setting for her earlier, popular trilogy of *Archangel*, *Jovah's Angel* and *The Alleluia*

Files. However, to typify Shinn's writing as religious or Judaeo-Christian is really an exaggeration as, aside from some place names, a lot of singing, a God whose name is baldly borrowed, and a love-thy-neighbour optimism that runs throughout the novel, the central conceit of her stories is their adoption of angels as characters, for which the rest appears largely to provide a fictive excuse. And the religious references, as with the space fantasy context which thinly frames the narrative, are merely a shell from which Shinn can explore her real interests, which are relationships and romance.

The romantic elements of this tale appear early, and almost stalled further reading of the novel. The story opens with Susannah, a dutiful daughter and member of one of the Edori tribes, a nomadic race that live in a state of primitive pastoral grace that could have come from the pen of Rousseau or one of the other Roman-tics (an insult to them, really). Communal love abounds, life is simple, and the tribes wander where they will, each night gathering to sing and praise the gifts of Yovah. Of course, Susannah is in love with "the handsomest of all the Edori men, the most charming, the sweetest tempered, the most loving." Granted, her lover is "a habitual flirt, a lover of women, a carefree man with such charisma that he could not be held to ordinary standards," but that is part of his charm, which Susannah accepts, at least at the outset. And I will certainly understand if anyone wishes to pause here to cope with a bout of nausea.

Susannah's idealized life is about to be interrupted, however, by no less than the will of god. An angel arrives one night in their camp to inform Susannah that god has chosen her to be his angelica upon his ascension as archangel, and that together they will rule and watch over Samaria. She's had a spat with her Edori lover over an infidelity, and though she initially declines the offer, when the time comes she allows herself to be swept up in his arms and carried to his eyrie on top of a mountain. Of course, there are obstacles to their living happily-ever-after. Her future angelic spouse has difficulties in communicating his feelings and Susannah is not the type of woman that can live without love. Also, being the simple and direct person that she is, she finds it hard to adapt to the luxurious, court-like environment of her new home, despite that fact that nearly everyone, angel and human alike, immediately warm to her. She misses the simplicity of life

with the Edori, and the physical and communal affection that was shared amongst the tribe. Her loneliness in splendour and her future husband's inability to relate to women threatens the future decreed by god, as does an invasion by mysterious men armed with strange and annihilating weapons. As Samaria has been ruled by uninterrupted peace for centuries-violence almost unheard of-the angels and their human charges are little prepared to confront such sudden attacks, and to respond in-kind is unthinkable as it goes against their own nature as well as the will of god. Destruction seems imminent, and Susannah's future unclear. But in the end it appears this was all part of god's plan, and Susannah is once again swept away on the wings of an angel, this time forever.

If one can get past the blatant romanticizing or enjoys this kind of romance disguised as space fantasy, Ms. Shinn proves herself capable of creating a fairly strong if conventional story centred around her characters, while throwing in just enough science fiction elements to make the tale intriguing for those that read little of the genre or have no interest in hard science or conceptual theories. Her treatment of the Edori offers some interest as a counterpoint to the hierarchical society of the angels, with an underlying if simplistic criticism of "civilized" society (though recreations of nomadic tribal culture as well as fantasy with science-fictional and religious overtones has been handled more deftly in Katherine Kerr's recent *Snare*). But this is essentially a novel about romance, relationships and the development of the novel's archetypal characters, in which fantasy and sci-

ence fiction play only minimum and supporting roles.

The latest novel by Sarah Ash, *Lord of Snow and Shadows* (Bantam Press, £10.99), is much more readily identifiable as epic fantasy than Sharon Shinn's confection. The first part of an obligatory trilogy, "The Tears of Artamon," it starts off conventionally enough with a secret and reluctant prince whose heredity has been hidden from him. Upon his father's murder he is abducted by the druzhina, clan warriors that served his father and who intend to install him as heir to the Drakhaon throne. Transported against his will to the stark wintry realm of the Azhkendir Moors, Gavril learns that a dark secret lies behind his forced inheritance, a mystery of monstrous power, a blood bond passed down to each generation. Nor is his reign uncontested, for his father has left a murderous legacy that threatens to be visited upon the son. And try as he might to escape this grim fate, Gavril finds he is increasingly haunted by ghosts from the past as well as enemies in the present.

Ms Ash attempts to bring to her tale a scope of global intrigue and conflict, viewed through multiple perspective and various, multifaceted characters. Unfortunately, her skills seem not quite up to the task. Dismissing its conventional aspects, which could yet have proven successful in more capable hands, as evidenced by the work of Robert Jordan, George R. R. Martin, Robin Hobb or Katharine Kerr when handling similar subject matter on an epic scale, this saga somehow lacks the cohesion and foundation required to bring all its elements together. It is as if the reader glimpses the wood studs for the walls of the story's structure without the additional drywall, spackle and finishing touches necessary to make the rooms livable. There is a sense of focus constantly shifting peripatetically between one plotline or character and another, without enough substance or supportive background furnished to provide complete credibility. While I certainly don't wish to advocate the kind of interminable world-building and detail that can expand a 500-page novel into eight in seemingly never-ending, multi-volume series, too much glossing over of events and characters takes place here to make the story fully convincing. And when the author does err in a too-much-is-not-enough approach, it is with the tossing in of incidental subplots and events that distract rather than enlarge her central tale.

Similarly, Ash displays a proclivity for interjecting interior asides, often in the form of dreams or visions taking place within yet outside the context of the story's overall narrative



that become interruptive, further and artificially emphasized by shifts in tense, and often used to telegraph hints of things to come or postings from the subconscious. While I understand the author's intent in utilizing this device, their occurrence is more contrived than seamless, and over time their recurrent use to telegraph future events or a character's dawning understanding become tiresome and redundant. Finally, the opening to this novel seems rushed in its attempt to get to the grist of the story, an alacrity or superficiality of handling that appears elsewhere within the novel, such as with an emerging friendship in the face of murderous animosity, a young novice sent off by a witch to confront a powerful and deadly spirit, or a megalomaniacal king who gives up a siege in sight of victory. And Gavril seems singularly obtuse at times to those who obviously intend him harm.

Ms Ash has attempted to write a large-scale epic layered with diverse plots, myth and intrigue. She has also ambitiously sought to do so by creating a cast of characters as multifaceted as the various stories she has endeavoured to develop, all woven to form a tapestry around her central character. Unfortunately, she has added too many threads and colours without integrating them well enough to create a completely harmonious or cohesive weave, with the end result at times being a tangle or more often threads threatening to unravel. Though displaying evidence of skill as a writer, based solely upon this novel, I would have to say that the author's ambitions so far have outpaced her abilities.

Finally, some notable mentions. Gollancz has recently published a collection of novellas that first appeared separately last year from PS Publishing. Edited by PS publisher Peter Crowther, *Cities* (Gollancz, £12.99) gathers together Paul Di Filippo's widely acclaimed "A Year in the Linear City"; China Miéville's specular horror "The Tain," based on a conceit by Borges; Michael Moorcock's welcome resurrection of Jerry Cornelius in "Firing the Cathedral"; and Geoff Ryman's caustic and compassionate eulogy of the elderly in "V.A.O." As three of these novellas were reviewed previously in *Interzone*, and as Paul Di Filippo's imaginative if transient vision of a city laid along a single thoroughfare has already received so many accolades, making many of last year's best lists, it seems unlikely that the magazine's readers are not aware of it, as well as redundant to elaborate further on the other three narratives offered in this volume. Suffice it to say that all four stories are worthy of attention, and for

those of you who missed obtaining the original publications, the Gollancz reissue will offer a second opportunity, repackaged in an attractive, somewhat individual square and hardbound format. Also, the version of "Firing the Cathedral" found in this edition has been revised and improved on, according to the author, who is known for his inveterate tinkering with his own work. The title chosen for this anthology is slightly misleading, as only the stories by Di Filippo and Miéville draw upon an urban setting as a central focus. But the quality of all four narratives is high indeed, making this book well worth seeking out.

Similarly, Night Shade Books has just published editor Jeff VanderMeer's most recent anthology, *Album Zutique*. While I plan to review this collection in a future issue, I wanted to alert you to its publication lest it be gone by the time my comments appear. Those familiar with the reputation of VanderMeer's previous *Leviathan* anthologies will recognize that as an editor, Jeff VanderMeer has been behind the publication of some of

the most daring and imaginative short fiction printed in recent years, and there is every expectation that *Album Zutique* (\$12.99) will carry on that tradition. Authors whose stories are included are Stepan Chapman, Jeffrey Ford, Rhys Hughes, James Sallis, Michael Cisco, Elizabeth Hand and Steve Rasnic Tem, to name only the most notable. Additionally, there is a short story by K. J. Bishop, author of *The Etched City*, noted above. This anthology is available directly from the publisher, at www.nightshadebooks.com, or through Amazon. Also, fans of VanderMeer's own unique fiction may wish to be aware of the limited hardbound edition of his recent novel, *Veniss Underground* (\$40), a surreal foray of the imagination that threatens to overwhelm the nightmare visions of Heironymus Bosch, which it in part emulates. Also available through Night Shade, though trade and mass-market editions (\$15 and \$5.99) published by Prime are generally available.

William Thompson

Neanderthals Next Door (Plus One Last Romp)

Nigel Brown

Neanderthals are considered to be our closest long-lost cousins – only extinct by the geological eye-blink of about 28,000 years – and can serve as a mirror to measure ourselves against. It's an intriguing thought: what if it had been us (*Homo sapiens sapiens*), and not them, who had become extinct?

The second part of Robert J. Sawyer's trilogy "The Neanderthal Parallax," *Humans* (Tor, \$24.95), attempts an answer to this question. It continues directly on from its now Hugo-nominated predecessor *Hominids* (2002), which I reviewed in *Interzone* 182. In that book, Sawyer devised a parallel Earth inhabited by modern-day Neanderthals, not us (*Homo sapiens sapiens*). He related how a Neanderthal scientist, Ponter Boddit, unexpectedly arrived in our world and struck up a close friendship with a geneticist, Mary Vaughn.

Humans – another enjoyable, effortless read – takes their story forward, when the alternate-world Neanderthals re-open the gateway to our Earth. Diplomatic relations are set up between us and the Neanderthal government, but Sawyer chooses not to write much about the wider reactions of our world to these visitors: the majority of the novel is concerned with

the growing bond between Boddit, the gentle Neanderthal, and the emotionally scarred Vaughn, who was raped by an unknown assailant in the earlier book. As the story progresses, Sawyer uses Boddit's reaction to Vaughn's rape to demonstrate an alternative response to this crime. Mary Vaughn visits his Earth, so *Humans* takes us further into the Neanderthal world than its predecessor; paradoxically for its title, it's more about the Neanderthals than ourselves.

Using the latest research on Neanderthals, Sawyer has constructed a credible modern Neanderthal society, underpinned as much as possible by our sketchy knowledge of them. Given that they have evolved in the last Ice Age, the imagined split between our universes being only 70,000 years ago, the Neanderthal world is one still inhabited by mammoths (which they haven't hunted to extinction) and – because they have no global warming, with a much smaller population and industrial base – their version of Earth is cooler than ours, more comfortable for these Ice Age-evolved hominids. Also, they live in a non-agrarian modern hunter-gatherer society, and Sawyer presents it as an attractive alternative to our agrarian-dependent

world. Put simply, our assumed historical "great advance" in society – agriculture – had forced us to increase our population to work in the fields. Sure, the food surplus produced enabled some not to work on the land, but Sawyer's point is that in this Neanderthal society everyone escapes this daily toil: the time for creative leisure is democratically available to the whole population. So, in presenting a possible alternative to our society, Sawyer is writing good sf.

He goes further out on a limb, however, when he speculates that the Neanderthals followed the general primate pattern of coming "on heat" at particular times. How his Neanderthals cope with this is logical: the men live together, as do the women – except for those certain joyous days in the month. Party time! But when they're living apart, they're in stable homosexual relationships. The idea of a planet of bisexual Neanderthals seems pretty far-out, until you remember that this is a world untouched by any thought of God and a Judaeo-Christian moral framework. The ancient Greeks, with their practice of pederasty, spring to mind as an example of how, in our own species, these social mores can be considered normal, no matter how "abnormal" they are to us today.

But Sawyer's Neanderthals differ from us in other ways besides biology. Their technology has developed in a different direction; their greatest achievement has been a sensor device implanted into each individual. As they live their lives, every one of their actions is recorded continuously, with no possibility of tampering. This creates a world without alibis; none of these Neanderthals can commit any crime without it being available for all to see. Their society has become crime-free, because the punishments they have decreed for any transgressions against their social code are, by our standards, draconian. For instance: if any Neanderthal was to strike another – and they're so strong that would be attempted murder – then not only would they be punished by emasculation, but the same would be visited upon their close genetic relatives to "purge their gene pool" of such violent behaviour.

There's a deep irony here, because the Neanderthals appear to be incapable of any belief in a deity, yet their society has evolved a technological omniscience similar to that credited to our own species' God. Any Neanderthal can view anyone else's actions, upon which they can be held to account. This has the effect of replacing an all-seeing, judging God with the power of society as a whole. Democracy indeed. Contrasted with this, of course, is our own world in

which Sawyer, by making the action of rape a central part of the novel's plot, is determined to show our "God-fearing" society in its worst light.

The novel is framed by Ponter Boddit discussing his actions on our Earth with a Neanderthal version of a psychotherapist. Their conversation is telling, as, although they are mystified by *Homo sapiens sapiens*'s belief in God and an afterlife, they fail to see that although the Neanderthal world is free of crime, it only appears to be an environment of moral superiors. As Kant said, if people are good just because you punish them if they are not, then you aren't actually turning them into good people, you're only turning them into pragmatic people.

But the story is not over yet. We have the third part of this trilogy to look forward to: *Hybrids*, due out in September of this year. If it's as good as its predecessors (and you can read the first two chapters of *Hybrids* on Sawyer's website at www.sfwriter.com), then we're in for a treat.

As a literature of change, science fiction is often concerned with how things might be, although things can go horribly wrong if you use it as a personal planner (I'm still waiting to catch that Pan-Am Shuttle to the Moon, two years after 2001). Things are even worse for the characters in a story when they have an enormously extended life span. This sounds great at first, except that these hapless immortals have to develop strategies to cope with more change than any of us have to struggle through in a natural human lifetime. This was the major problem for Robert Heinlein's Lazarus Long in *Time Enough for Love* (1973). We re-visit such territory in *For Love and Glory* by Poul Anderson (Tor \$24.95).

Originally conceived as two stories for Isaac Asimov's "Isaac's Universe" volumes *The Diplomacy Guild* (1990) and *Phases in Chaos* (1991), Anderson decided to re-write these tales and incorporate them into an independent novel. I can't vouch for how different they are, although Anderson says they're "much altered."

The narrative revolves around the relationship between a wealthy aristocratic girl, Lissa of the House of Windholm, and a rejuvenated older man, Torben Hebo of Earth. They first meet on separate expeditions to a newly-discovered planet, then go their own ways. Lissa returns to her homeworld, then arranges an expedition to a mysterious anomaly after a tip-off from a strange lizard-like alien named Orichalc; Hebo returns to Earth. We encounter an Anderson trademark here: the super-advanced civilization that operates beyond the ken of ordinary humans. In this case, it's the peo-

ple of Earth itself – all those humans who've elected to stay on Earth, and not colonize the stars – who are evolving into a "mental collective," or Earth-mind. This reminded me of Asimov's later Foundation books, but Anderson thankfully chooses to go down a different route than the Good Doctor. He explores the feelings of the returnee Hebo as the ancient Earthman explores a strange Earth that he hardly recognizes. The time Hebo takes out to visit the ruins of his past life are some of the most memorable passages in the book.

But there's a sense of wonder here that's paradoxically lacking when we follow Lissa on her adventure. This is more of a romp in space for the participants but, frankly, Hebo is the more interesting character – certainly the most sympathetic – and I missed his presence on Lissa's ship. Although Lissa emerges a more rounded, reflective individual by the middle of the book – where, I guess, the second original story for the "Isaac's Universe" series begins – essentially she's just a rich girl looking for adventure. Nothing wrong with that, but she seems too shallow a central character to make the most of the fascinating background Anderson has invented. She meets up with Hebo again, and they set off together to rescue her alien friend Orichalc when he's lost in an alien jungle. I can't, and won't, begin to describe all the plot convolutions of Anderson's novel; suffice it to say that there's never a dull moment, despite the feeling that we're only scratching the surface of this future world. Anderson draws the various plot strands together with the practised ease of a Grand Master of sf.

And yet this particular novel – while I'd give it a B+ for space adventure – isn't one that particularly plays to Anderson's strengths. Sadly, however, we're not going to see if Anderson was going to continue to build on this future world: he died in 2001. This latest novel is most likely his last, unless there are more in inventory. But I'd hate to think that anyone would read this book and come away with an opinion on Anderson's talent without seeing his other work – notably his time-travel stories. No other author seemed to have a greater knowledge of the nooks and crannies of history (especially that of the Scandinavian world) than Poul Anderson. I'd cite his novels *The Corridors of Time* (1965), and the wonderful *There Will Be Time* (1972), and the Time Patrol stories, beginning with *Guardians of Time* (1960), as masterpieces that range far beyond this last competent, though not exceptional, space adventure.

Nigel Brown

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Poul. **Going for Infinity: A Literary Journey.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30597-6, 416pp, trade paperback, cover by Vincent Di Fate, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy collection with autobiographical commentary, first published in the USA, 2002; this large volume of 18 stories and extracts, plus previously unpublished reminiscences, seems to have been put together shortly before the author's death in July 2001 as "a celebration and a memoir of Anderson's distinguished 60-year career in science fiction and fantasy" [60 years is a slight exaggeration – more like 55 years, 1947-2001]; recommended as a sampler of some of the author's best fiction.) *22nd May 2003.*

Barry, Max. **Jennifer Government.** Abacus, ISBN 0-349-11598-2, 336pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; set in the near future, when "the world will be run by giant American corporations," and described as "a wickedly funny satire on globalization and marketing hype," it's a second novel by a new Australian writer [born 1973] and is pitched at the mainstream lit'ry market; in the US review quotes, as given in the accompanying publicity sheet, the usual coded language is deployed to position the book as mainstream and to avoid calling it sf: "a thoroughly modern tale in the tradition of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley," "Catch-22 by way of *The Matrix*," "smartass punky satire for the late capitalist era," etc.) *3rd July 2003.*

Bear, Greg. **Darwin's Children.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225732-7, 387pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2003; the publishers don't explicitly say so, but presumably this is some sort of sequel to the author's earlier bio-thriller, *Darwin's Radio* [1999]; like the previous book, this one is obviously hard sf, but is marketed for the mainstream Michael Crichton audience, rather than as part of HarperCollins's more generic Voyager list.) *2nd June 2003.*

Berg, Carol. **Song of the Beast.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45923-7, 467pp, A-format paperback, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's blurbed as "the epic story of Aidan MacAllister... Beloved by the gods, he could transform the souls of men with his voice and harp.") *May 2003.*

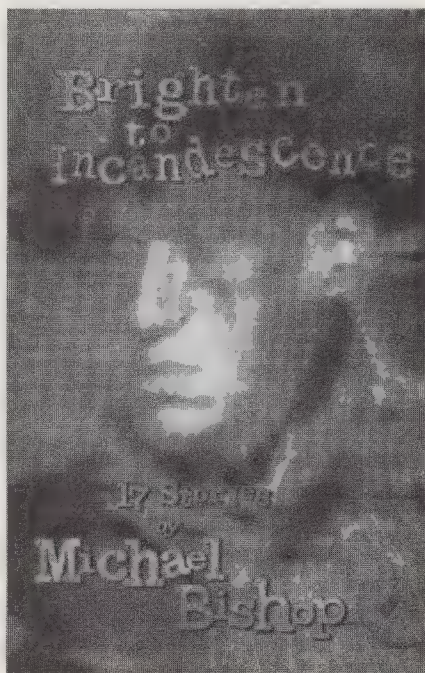
Bishop, Michael. **Brighten to Incandescence: 17 Stories.** Introduction by Lucius Shepard. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-16-9, xv+295pp, hardcover, cover by Jamie Bishop, \$24.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; of the 17 stories, 16 are previously-uncollected reprints from magazines and anthologies [including two, "Sequel on Skorpios" and "We're All in This Alone," the latter a

collaboration with Paul Di Filippo, from *Interzone*], while one, "Last Night Out," is original to the book – and it deals with the events of 11th September 2001; recommended; to order, see the publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com; this is another nicely-designed volume from Golden Gryphon, their 26th.) *June 2003.*

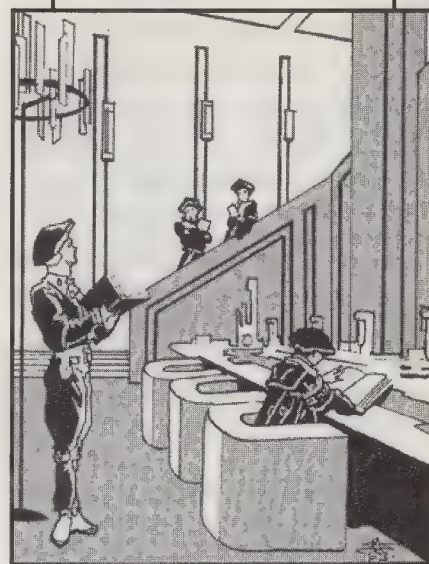
Borchardt, Alice. **The Dragon King.** "The Tales of Guinevere." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81512-1, 569pp, A-format paperback, cover by Scott McKowen, £6.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; described as a "wonderfully subversive reworking of a time-honoured tale," and the first of a trilogy, it's yet another retelling of the story of Queen Guinevere; chapter one is headed "Cornwall, England... Year of Our Lord 470," which may strike historically-aware readers as doubly anachronistic: Cornwall wasn't absorbed into England until the ninth or tenth century, a long time after Arthur's putative era; also, the Anno Domini system of dating wasn't invented – by Dionysius Exiguus in Rome – until about 60 years after 470; the author, who lives in Texas, is the sister of bestselling novelist Anne Rice.) *5th June 2003.*

Bova, Ben. **Saturn.** "A novel of the ringed planet – and the humans who will explore her." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87218-6, 412pp, hardcover, cover by John Harris, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; having done the Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter and the Asteroids, Bova moves on to Saturn; this loose series of hard-sf social melodramas is now being referred to by his publishers as "The Grand Tour.") *12th June 2003.*

Brooks, Terry. **Morgawr: The Voyage of the Jerle Shannara, Book Three.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-1496-9, 401pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; follow-up to *Ilse Witch* [2000] and *Antrax* [2001], in this sub-set of Brooks's popular "Shannara" series.) *6th May 2003.*



BOOKS RECEIVED



APRIL/MAY
2003

Bunch, Chris. **Knighthood of the Dragon: Dragonmaster, Book Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-195-0, 408pp, C-format paperback, cover by Les Edwards, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; second in a trilogy by the Vietnam-veteran author who is an expert in "slam-bang excitement, lusty action and military magic" – in the words of his admirer Julian May.) *May 2003.*

Chadbourn, Mark. **Wonderland.** Foreword by Graham Joyce. Frontispiece by Dominic Harman. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-14-6, 95pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf/fantasy TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous standard edition [hardcover; not seen] priced at £10; the limited "deluxe edition" which has been sent as a review copy is signed by author, illustrator and introducer; this is the seventh in a series of handsomely-produced "Doctor Who" novellas from David J. Howe and Stephen James Walker's Telos imprint; for ordering information see their website: www.telos.co.uk.) *24th April 2003.*

Coe, David B. **Seeds of Betrayal: Book Two of Winds of the Forelands.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87808-7, 540pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in a Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy, following *Rules of Ascension* [2002].) *27th May 2003.*

Constantine, Storm. **The Wraiths of Will and Pleasure: The First Book of the Wraeththu Histories.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30346-9, 496pp, hardcover, cover by Rick Berry, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; in which Constantine returns to her beginnings, the world of her original "Wraeththu" trilogy of 15



years ago; Neil Gaiman has a rather rude quote on the front cover: "I wouldn't swap her for a dozen Anne Rices!" – rude to Anne Rice, that is.) *29th May 2003.*

Corsaro, Frank. **Kunma**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-765-30472-4, 302pp, hardcover, cover by Barry Appell, \$24.95. (Horror novel, first edition; described as a "metaphysical thriller" and inspired by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, this is a debut novel by a man billed as "the world-renowned director of stage and opera," apparently active in those fields since the 1950s; one has to suspect that it may be ghost-written, or partially so, and we note without further comment that a likely candidate, Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, is thanked in the acknowledgments, where she is described as "really the ultimate fairy godmother, edging the book toward publication.") *12th June 2003.*

Counter, Ben. **Daemon World**. "Warhammer 40,000." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84416-001-7, 282pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; a second novel, following his *Soul Drinker* [2002], by a British writer who has contributed short stories to Games Workshop's *Inferno!* magazine.) *April 2003.*

Crowther, Peter, ed. **Cities**. "The very best of fantasy comes to town." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07504-X, xi+292pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £12.99. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, first edition; a squarish hardcover [wider than it's tall], this collects four notable novellas which were published separately last year as slim books by Crowther's small-press imprint, PS Publishing: *A Year in the Linear City* by Paul Di Filippo, *The Tain* by China Miéville, *Firing the Cathedral* by Michael Moorcock and V.A.O. by Geoff Ryman; this edition drops the original introductions, by various hands, and adds a new one by the editor, Peter Crowther.) *17th April 2003.*

DeFalco, Tom. **Hulk: The Incredible Guide**. Foreword by Stan Lee. Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 0-7513-6772-9, 128pp, very large-format hardcover, £14.99. (Lavishly illustrated history and A-Z of the Marvel Comics sf hero/villain, first edition; it's timed to coincide with a new "blockbuster movie," *The Hulk*, directed by Ang Lee [no relation to Stan!]; the publishing house, Dorling Kindersley, which famously went bust a few years ago for an sf-related reason – they over-invested in *Star Wars* spinoffs – is now "A Penguin Company.") *5th June 2003.*

Dick, Philip K. **Eye in the Sky**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07456-6, 243pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1957; one of Dick's early best – recommended.) *8th May 2003.*

Feist, Raymond E., and Joel Rosenberg. **Murder in LaMut**. "Legends of the Riftwar." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648389-5, 324pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; second in what appears to be a sharecropped series, following *Honoured Enemy* [2001] which was by Feist and William Forstchen.) *2nd June 2003.*

Ford, Jeffrey. **The Physiognomy**. Tor (UK), ISBN 0-330-41319-8, 244pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; winner of the 1988 World Fantasy Award; this is its first UK edition; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 138 and by Paul McAuley in *IZ* 154.) *16th May 2003.*

Ford, Jeffrey. **The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque**. "A fable, a nightmare, a vision, a mystery." Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-0659-5, 310pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; Ford's new opus is set in 1890s New York, and it comes with lavish praise from the American reviewers; despite the book's sedate-sounding title, according to the *New York Times*, "Ford weaves a strange and affecting tale of obsession, inspiration and the supernatural, with a dash of murder thrown in as well.") *16th May 2003.*

Gibson, William, and Bruce Sterling. **The Difference Engine**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-60029-2, 383pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in the UK, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 43; this is Messrs Gibson & Sterling's now-venerable "steampunk" classic, set in an alternative 19th century; the opening section, "The Angel of Goliad," first appeared as a novella in *Interzone* 40, October 1990.) *8th May 2003.*

Green, Simon R. **Something from the Nightside**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-01065-2, 230pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jonathan Barkat, \$6.50. (Fantasy/crime novel, first edition; concerning a supernatural detective, it's the first in a new series of paperback-original quickies by British writer Green – he's the ideal author for them.) *June 2003.*

Greenberg, Martin H., and Larry Segriff, eds. **Future Wars**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0129-1, vii+317pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gregory Bridges, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains ten all-new tales on military themes, by Robin Wayne Bailey, Bill Fawcett, William H. Keith, Jr., Barry B. Longyear, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Robert J. Sawyer and others; cunningly timed to coincide with the recent Iraq war, it's yet another of a long series of such paperback-original sf, fantasy and horror anthologies produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books – i.e. the ongoing Greenberg/DAW "pulp magazine.") *April 2003.*

Greenwood, Ed. **The Dragon's Doom: A Tale of the Band of Four**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30223-3, 415pp, hardcover, cover by Todd Lockwood, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *The Kingless Land* [2000], *The Vacant Throne* [2001] and *A Dragon's Ascension* [2002].) *28th May 2003.*

Grimwood, Jon Courtenay. **Felaheen: The Third Arabesk**. Earthlight, 0-7434-6117-7, 357pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *Pashazade* and *Effendi*, in the "Arabesk" trilogy, set in a timeline where Germany won the First World War and where the Middle East is still dominated by the Ottoman Empire.) *6th May 2003.*

Haber, Karen, ed. **Exploring the Matrix: Visions of the Cyber Present**. Illustrated by Darrel Anderson and Robert Zohrab. Introduction by Pat Cadigan. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-7502-X, 271pp, C-format paperback, cover by Zohrab, £10.99. (Anthology of essays about cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk sf, first edition; timed to coincide with the release of the sequel to the film *The Matrix* [although not an official tie-in], this is a packaged book from Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc.; it contains newly-commissioned essays by Kevin J. Anderson, Stephen Baxter, David Brin, Paul Di Filippo, Alan Dean Foster, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Joe Haldeman, James Patrick Kelly, Mike Resnick, John Shirley, Bruce Sterling, Ian Watson, Walter Jon Williams and others.) *6th May 2003.*

Haber, Karen, ed. **Exploring the Matrix: Visions of the Cyber Present**. Illustrated by Darrel Anderson and Robert Zohrab. Introduction by Pat Cadigan. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-31358-6, xvi+271pp, hardcover, cover by Zohrab, \$24.95. (Anthology of essays about cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk sf, first published in the UK, 2003; this is the US edition of the above, according to the official publication date appearing a week later than the UK edition [although in reality there's probably no difference in the on-sale dates].) *15th May 2003.*

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Cerulean Sins: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-139-X, 470pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; the eleventh in the popular "Anita Blake" dark fantasy/crime crossover sequence which began as an Ace Books paperback-original series.) *1st May 2003.*

Harlan, Thomas. **Wasteland of Flint**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30192-X, 430pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; by an author hitherto best known for four large fantasy novels, it's described as a "dazzling new science fiction epic" and appears to be the first of a series; the author himself makes his generic antecedents clear in a dedication: "Without the inspiration of James H. Schmitz, H. Beam Piper, and Leigh Brackett, there would be no book...") *23rd April 2003.*

Harrison, Harry. **A Stainless Steel Trio**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30278-0, 492pp, trade paperback, cover by Julie Bell, \$17.95. (Sf omnibus, first published in the USA, 2002; it contains three of Harrison's popular "Slippery Jim diGriz" space adventures: *A Stainless Steel Rat is Born* [1985], *The Stainless Steel Rat Gets Drafted* [1987] and *The Stainless Steel Rat Sings the Blues* [1994].) *3rd June 2003.*

Hartwell, David G., ed. **The Mammoth Book of 20th Century Science Fiction, Volume One**. Robinson, ISBN 1-84119-513-8, xix+586pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joe Roberts, £6.99. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA as half of *The Science Fiction Century*, 1997; this edition contains a new introduction, dated 2003; as we said of the original, brontosaurus-sized anthology: "It's an

interesting selection which contains a good deal of familiar stuff along with much judiciously-chosen material, often of novella length, which has been under-anthologized hitherto [e.g. H. G. Wells's "A Story of the Days to Come" – originally a five-parter in *The Pall Mall Magazine*, June-October 1899 – which has never appeared in an sf anthology before now]; besides Wells, non-generic authors include Dino Buzzati, E. M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling, Alexander Kuprin, C. S. Lewis, Jack London and J.-H. Rosny; the genre names, from Poul Anderson and James Blish to John Wyndham and Roger Zelazny, are too numerous and too obvious to list here; recommended.") 24th April 2003.

Herbert, Brian. **Dreamer of Dune: The Biography of Frank Herbert.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30646-8, 576pp, hardcover, cover by Gregory Manchess, \$27.95. (Biography of a leading American sf author, first edition; timed, perhaps fortuitously, to coincide with the recent TV mini-series adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Children of Dune*, this is an overdue life of one of yesteryear's genre "greats" [died 1986]; as a small taster, here is a sample sentence [p35]: "Before the age of twelve, Frank, ever curious, read the complete works of Shakespeare and discovered the poetry of Ezra Pound.") 19th April 2003.

Hogan, Lee. **Enemies.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45919-9, 406pp, A-format paperback, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; more Russian-flavoured planetary romance, a follow-up to the author's *Belarus* [2002]; it's dedicated, rather unusually, "For Peter the Great, who dreamed of the future, then tried to make it happen, and for Yuri and Valentina, the first people in space.") April 2003.

Jeapes, Ben. **The Xenocide Mission.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-54815-4, 388pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; Jeapes's third novel, following *His Majesty's Starship* and *Winged Chariot*, it's another solid-looking space adventure; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 184.) 1st May 2003.

Jones, William B., Jr., ed. **Robert Louis Stevenson Reconsidered: New Critical Perspectives.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1399-9, viii+254pp, trade paperback, \$32. (Anthology of critical essays on the works of Stevenson, first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the contributors, who are fairly high-powered, include Jenni Calder, Alan Sandison and Graham Tulloch, and their papers are drawn from a conference which marked RLS's 150th birthday in 2000; among other things, there are three essays on RLS's horror masterpiece, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, another on RLS and "Scottish Gothic," and even one [by the volume's editor] on the adaptations of RLS for *Classics Illustrated* comics; recommended to all Stevensonians.) June 2003.

Kearney, Paul. **Ships from the West: Book Five of The Monarchies of God.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07400-0, 296pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; July/August 2003

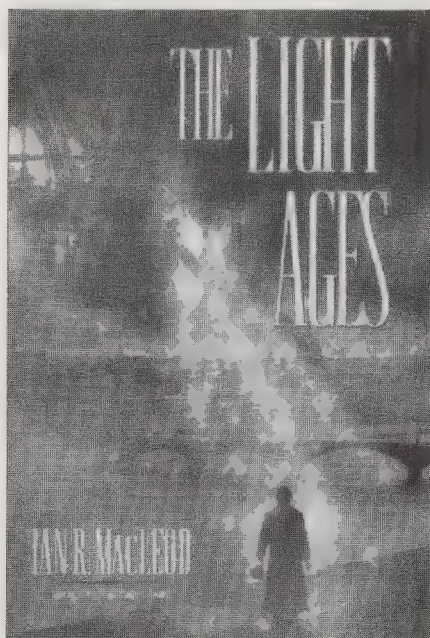
this came nearly three years after the previous volume in the series, *The Second Empire* [March 2000], and it may, or may not, mark a conclusion; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 188.) 8th May 2003.

King, Stephen. **From a Buick 8.** "The international bestseller." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-77070-8, 467pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2002; just as its title promises, it's a story about an automobile.) 9th June 2003.

King, William. **Giantslayer.** "Warhammer: A Gotrek & Felix Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-273-3, 317pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; seventh in a "Warhammer" sub-series by erstwhile *Interzone*-contributor Bill King, featuring his recurring hero-and-dwarf characters Felix Jaeger and Gotrek Gurnisson; the earlier novels were *Trollslayer*, *Skavenslayer*, *Daemonslayer*, *Dragonslayer*, *Beastslayer* and *Vampireslayer* – all first published by Games Workshop in 1999-2001.) April 2003.

Langford, David. **Up Through an Empty House of Stars: Reviews and Essays 1980-2002.** Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-055-0, 310pp, trade paperback, \$21.95. (Sf/fantasy review collection, first edition; there is also a hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$34.95; this bumper volume complements Dave Langford's two earlier *Critical Assembly* collections, containing as it does about a hundred pieces first published widely in magazines, journals, fanzines and reference books; witty and insightful stuff, rightly commended on the cover by John Clute, Gregory Feeley and Lionel Fanthorpe – essential Langford, highly recommended; Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; to order, see the website: www.wildsidepress.com.) May 2003.

Leonard, Paul. **The Last Resort.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-48605-8, 275pp, A-format



paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor; "Good Times Inc. promised a new tourist experience, with hotels in every major period of human history...") 2nd June 2003.

McKillop, Patricia A. **In the Forests of Serre.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-01011-3, 295pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; more fairy-tale stuff; like World Fantasy Award-winner McKillop's other recent titles, it's in Ace Books' attractive small hardcover format.) 3rd June 2003.

MacLeod, Ian R. **The Light Ages.** Ace, 0-441-01055-5, 456pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, \$23.95. (Alternate-history fantasy novel, first edition; MacLeod's long-awaited second novel is a "gaslight romance" [see *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*] set in a re-imagined Victorian industrial age powered by "aether"; although it makes its first appearance in America, it looks to be very English – and intriguing; the accompanying publicity sheet contains a quote from Michael Moorcock: "The *Light Ages* is an outstanding smoke-and-sorcery saga to rival Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* trilogy and China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*.) 6th May 2003.

MacLeod, Ian R. **The Light Ages.** Earthlight, 0-7434-6242-4, 456pp, hardcover, cover by Edward Miller, £17.99. (Alternate-history fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; MacLeod, an *Interzone* discovery who lives in the West Midlands, has been writing for about 15 years and is the winner of two World Fantasy Awards, yet this historical fantasia is his first book to appear in Britain [astonishing!]; it comes with eager commendations from Brian Aldiss, James P. Blaylock, Gardner Dozois, Christopher Fowler, Jeff VanderMeer and Gene Wolfe.) 2nd June 2003.

Meaney, John. **Context: Book Two in the Nulapeiron Sequence.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81357-9, 572pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; a third novel – far-out, far-future stuff – by a British writer whose short stories have appeared in *Interzone*; it's a sequel to his second, *Paradox* [2000], which a *Guardian* reviewer described as "pulp SF with class.") 5th June 2003.

Mitchell, Mike, ed. **The Dedalus Book of Austrian Fantasy, 1890-2000.** Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-13-3, 401pp, B-format paperback, cover by Friedensreich Hundertwasser, £11.99. (Fantasy/horror anthology, first edition in this form; it appears to be an expanded edition of an anthology originally published in 1993 as *The Dedalus/Ariadne Book of Austrian Fantasy: The Meyrink Years, 1890-1930* – but the publishers do not make this very clear; among the authors represented, all translated from German by the editor, are Arthur Schnitzler, Gustav Meyrink, Paul Busson, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Rainer Maria Rilke, Karl Hans Strobl, Leo Perutz, Franz Kafka, Max Brod, Franz Werfel, Hermann Ungar, Anton Fuchs, Erich Fried, Ilse Aichinger and Jakov Lind; an interesting book, dealing with a rich source of European fantasy which is too little known to present-day English-language



readers – despite the fact that this Austro-Hungarian vein of horror-fantasy was very influential in the shaping of the horror-film tradition, even in Hollywood.) 24th April 2003.

Moffitt, Donald. **Jovian**. ibooks, ISBN 0-7434-5277-1, viii+421pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Larkin, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; this is the American first edition with a British price and publication date specified; commended by Greg Bear as “packed with ideas and the true spirit of high-tech adventure,” it’s US writer Moffitt’s first new sf novel in many years; see the publishers’ website, www.ibooksinc.com, for further details.) June 2003.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Dancers at the End of Time**. “SF Masterworks, 53.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07476-0, 664pp, B-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Sf omnibus, first published in 1993; it contains: *An Alien Heat* [1972], *The Hollow Lands* [1974] and *The End of All Songs* [1976], all slightly revised since their first appearances; the three novels previously appeared in an omnibus of the same title from Granada Publishing [1980]; one of Moorcock’s best – recommended.) 8th May 2003.

Morton, Oliver. **Mapping Mars: Science, Imagination and the Birth of a World**. Fourth Estate, ISBN 1-84115-669-8, xv+351pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Popular science text, first published in the UK, 2002; illustrated with 16 pages of photographs; by a British journalist – former science editor of *The Economist*, contributing editor to *Wired*, contributor to *The New Yorker*, etc, etc – this is a well-informed meditation on the subject of the planet Mars, in imagination and in reality; Morton knows his sf, and drops all the right names, from H. G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs to Philip K. Dick and Kim Stanley Robinson; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 183.) 2nd June 2003.

O'Neill, Anthony. **The Lamplighter**. Hodder Headline/Review, ISBN 0-7553-0332-6, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £18.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2003; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen] priced at £10.99; another “gaslight romance” [see under Ian MacLeod, above] this is set in 1880s Edinburgh and involves a series of mysterious murders; it’s a second novel by a new Australian writer [judging from the photograph of him on the inside back flap, he’s a very Irish Australian]; his first novel was called *Scheherazade*, and seems to have been a fantasy, but we never saw it; *The Lamplighter* was the title of a once-famous Victorian bestseller, by Maria Susanna Cummins, but Mr O’Neill is probably well aware of that, since he seems to have done his homework: the “Acknowledgments” at the end of this book cite 19th-century works by Robert Louis Stevenson, J. M. Barrie, David Masson [the sf writer David I. Masson’s great-grandfather], Sir Walter Scott and many others.) 29th May 2003.

Palmer, Christopher. **Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the**

Postmodern. “Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies.” Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-628-3, xii+259pp, C-format paperback, £18.95. (Critical study of a major American sf writer, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £39.95; the author is an Australian academic who has previously published essays “on Shakespeare and Umberto Eco, Iain M. Banks and Baz Luhrmann”; parts of this book have previously been published in different form as papers in *Extrapolation*, *Science-Fiction Studies* and elsewhere.) May 2003.

Perry, Robert, and Mike Tucker. **Loving the Alien**. “Doctor Who.” BBC, 0-563-48604-X, 270pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace; the blurb entices: “What is the secret experiment being conducted by the British Rocket Group? Why are giant ants appearing in the suburbs of 1950s London?”) 5th May 2003.

Pinto, Ricardo. **The Standing Dead: Book Two of The Stone Dance of the Chameleon Trilogy**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81285-8, 730pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the Portuguese-born Scottish author’s second novel, follow-up – after a longish gap – to *The Chosen* [1999].) 1st May 2003.

Pratchett, Terry, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. **The Science of Discworld II: The Globe**. Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-88805-0, 368pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Kidby, £6.99. (Popular science text, based on the “Discworld” series of fantasies by Pratchett; first published in the UK, 2002; like its predecessor, *The Science of Discworld* [1999], it’s built around a humorous-fantasy frame by Pratchett, but most of the chapters consist of pop-scientific exposition by Stewart and Cohen; this volume concentrates mainly on “the evolution and development of the human mind, culture, language, art, and science.”) 1st May 2003.

Rann, Sue. **Looking for Mr Nobody**. No Exit Press, ISBN 1-84243-066-1, 254pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf/crime novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer [born 1964]; set in the near future, in the Amsterdam crime world, it’s described as “William Gibson meets Iain Banks in [a] story of military-issue designer drugs and clubbers, hackers, kooks and spooks”; like Max Barry’s *Jennifer Government* [see above], it’s aimed at a mainstream audience.) 19th June 2003.

Reed, Robert. **Sister Alice**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-125-X, 408pp, A-format paperback, cover by Lee Gibbons, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2003; far-future, wide-screen stuff, an “epic of god-like humans and their colossal blunders”; it’s a fix-up of five novelettes originally published in *Asimov’s SF*, 1993-2000.) 1st May 2003.

Resnick, Laura. **The White Dragon: In Fire Forged, Part One**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-89056-7, 494pp, hardcover, cover by Romas, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the opening book of a Big Commercial Fantasy diptych – it “just turned out to be such a big novel that it wasn’t

feasible for Tor Books to publish it in one volume,” explains the author.) 30th June 2003.

Resnick, Mike, ed. **Women Writing Science Fiction as Men**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0148-8, 320pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains 16 all-original stories by women writing in the first person from a male perspective; contributors include Janis Ian, Mercedes Lackey, Terry McGarry, Susan R. Matthews, Severna Park, Laura Resnick, Jennifer Roberson, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Karen E. Taylor and Leslie What, among others – many of whom are regular contributors to the ongoing Martin H. Greenberg “pulp” [although he’s not named as co-editor, the copyright is shared by Tekno Books, which is Greenberg’s company].) June 2003.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Redemption Ark**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07384-5, 646pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; Reynolds’s third novel, and another blockbuster – follow-up to his well-received *Revelation Space* [2000] and *Chasm City* [2001]; it begins: “The dead ship was a thing of obscene beauty.”) 8th May 2003.

Roberts, Adam. **Jupiter Magnified**. Introduction by James Lovegrove. P Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-56-0, 104pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £10. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £25; it’s a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; the last third of the book actually consists of a collection of poems, supposedly written by one of the characters.) Late entry: March publication, received in April 2003.

Rosenberg, Joel. **Not Really the Prisoner of Zenda**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30046-X, 383pp, hardcover, cover by Todd Lockwood, \$24.95. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Not Exactly the Three Musketeers* [1999] and *Not Quite Scaramouche* [2001], in the “Guardians of the Flame” series; clearly this author has a fondness for the old swashbucklers.) 4th June 2003.

Saberhagen, Fred. **Berserker’s Star**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30423-6, 368pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Youll, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a new instalment in the long-lived “Berserker” series of space adventures.) 2nd June 2003.

Sladek, John. **Wholly Smokes: The Rise and Fall of the GST Tobacco Empire**. Illustrated by Arturo van Clippe. Cosmos Books [PO Box 301, Holicong, PA 18928-0301, USA], ISBN 1-59224-109-3, 125pp, trade paperback, \$15. (Sf novella, first edition; probably the last thing which Sladek [1937-2000] wrote, this amusing oddity is described as the “non-fact history of General Snuff and Tobacco, a very American tobacco company which seems to have been present at, or had a bizarre influence on, many great and not-so-great moments of history”; there is also an electronic version published in the UK by Ansible E-ditions [not seen]; Cosmos

Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher; to order, see the website: www.wildsidepress.com.) May 2003.

Smith, Mitchell. **Kingdom River: Book Two of the Snowfall Trilogy**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-765-30008-7, 400pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Koelsch, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *Snowfall* [2002], which was about "a world in the grip of a new Ice Age and a human race transformed by natural disaster and the collapse of civilization"; the author, although new to sf, is not young – born 1935.) 23rd June 2003.

Stableford, Brian. **Dark Ararat**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30596-8, 352pp, trade paperback, cover by Alan Pollack, \$16.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; fifth in the loose series of highly imaginative biotech novels Stableford has been writing for Tor Books, following *Inherit the Earth* [1998], *Architects of Emortality* [1999], *The Fountains of Youth* [2000] and *The Cassandra Complex* [2001]; in this one, "hundreds of years in our future, humanity is expanding out into the galaxy in gigantic colony ships"; reviewed by Liz Williams in *Interzone* 180.) 9th April 2003.

Stephensen-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **A. Bertram Chandler: Master Navigator of Space—A Working Bibliography**. 3rd edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 3." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-62-9, x+61pp, small-press paperback [A5, saddle-stitched], £3. (Sf author bibliography; the first and second editions appeared in 1985 and 1989, and this one is much updated and improved; Arthur Bertram Chandler [1912-1984] was a British seaman author who lived mainly in Australia from 1956; in his day, he was a prolific sf writer, and this modestly-priced but detailed booklet provides a detailed listing of his work; recommended to the bibliophiles.) May 2003.

Turner, Gary, and Marty Halpern, eds. **The Silver Gryphon**. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-15-0, xi+330pp, hardcover, cover by Thomas Canty, \$27.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first edition; a celebratory volume, it contains 20 all-new stories by authors associated with Golden Gryphon Press [founded in 1996 by the late Jim Turner]; they are Kevin J. Anderson, Kage Baker, Neal Barrett, Jr, Michael Bishop, Paul Di Filippo, Andy Duncan, Jeffrey Ford, R. Garcia y Robertson, James Patrick Kelly, Geoffrey A. Landis, Joe R. Lansdale, Richard A. Lupoff, Robert Reed, Warren Rochelle, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Richard Paul Russo, Lucius Shepard, Howard Waldrop, Ian Watson and George Zebrowski; to order, see the publishers' website: www.goldengryphon.com; this is another good-looking, well-produced volume of fantastic fiction from Golden Gryphon, their 25th [hence the title].) May 2003.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Cage of Nine Banestones: Volume Three of The Pearl Saga**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224731-3, 629pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £18.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's Big, it's Commercial, and it's Fantasy – follow-up to *The Ring of Five Dragons* [2001] and *The Veil of a* July/August 2003

Thousand Tears [2002]; the author has restored the original "Van" to his name, after several years of publishing martial-arts thrillers simply as "Eric Lustbader.") 19th May 2003.

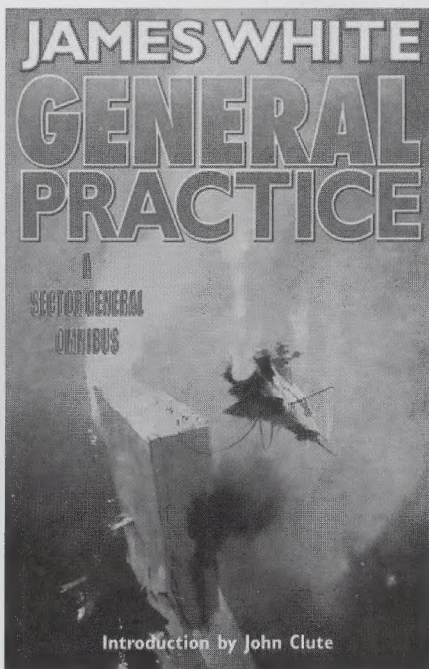
Vinge, Joan D. **The Summer Queen**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30446-5, 671pp, trade paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, \$17.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this was the belated sequel to Vinge's Hugo Award-winning *The Snow Queen* [1980].) 21st May 2003.

Warrington, Freda. **The Court of the Midnight King**. Pocket, 0-7434-1567-1, 575pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £7.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; it involves the Wars of the Roses in 15th-century England, and a hidden conflict, *Mists of Avalon*-style, between the Christian God and the Mother Goddess.) 2nd June 2003.

Weis, Margaret. **Mistress of Dragons**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30468-6, 381pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Youll, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it's "the first volume in an epic trilogy entitled *The Dragonvard*," although that's not mentioned on the title page.) 13th May 2003.

Welch, Jane. **The Allegiance of Man: Volume Three of The Book of Man**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711251-3, 516pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of the trilogy which began with *Dawn of a Dark Age* [2001]; we seem to have missed volume two, which was called *The Broken Chalice* [2002, presumably].) 22nd April 2003.

Wexler, Robert Freeman. **In Springdale Town**. Introduction by Lucius Shepard. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-52-8, 86pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £10. (Fantasy novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £25; it's a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies; the author is American, and a



contributor to small-press magazines – including one 'zine with the extremely twee title of *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*.) Late entry: March publication, received in April 2003.

White, James. **General Practice: A Sector General Omnibus**. Introduction by John Clute. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30663-8, 510pp, trade paperback, cover by John Harris, \$19.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it gathers together two more of the novels in the late James White's well-liked series about a giant multi-species hospital in outer space – *Code Blue—Emergency* [1987] and *The Genocidal Healer* [1991].) 8th May 2003.

Williams, Liz. **Empire of Bones**. Tor (UK), ISBN 0-330-41323-6, 422pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; the second novel by a British writer, resident in Brighton, whose short stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* and elsewhere; see the interview with her in *IZ* 179.) 26th June 2003.

Williams, Liz. **The Poison Master**. Tor (UK), ISBN 1-4050-0562-9, 358pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; Williams's third novel, and her first publication [together with the above book] in the UK, it's alchemical sf, about "what would happen if physics had turned out slightly differently" – in the author's words.) 26th June 2003.

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **Refugee: Force Heretic, II**. "Star Wars: The New Jedi Order." Arrow/Lucas Books, ISBN 0-09-941037-0, xiv+397pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Foster, £6.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 2003; the Australian duo of space-opera experts continue to rent out their talents to George Lucas's *Star Wars* franchise in this second of a trilogy.) 1st May 2003.

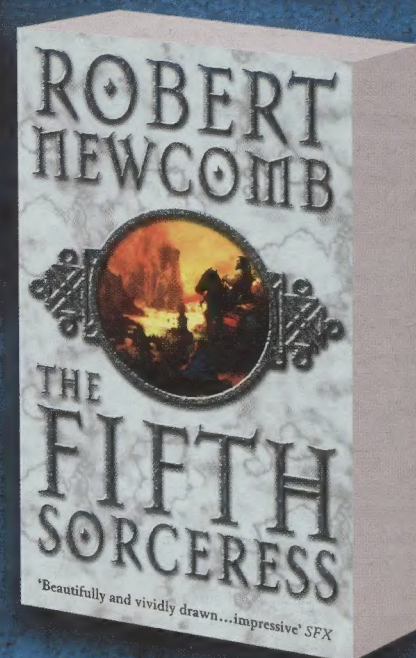
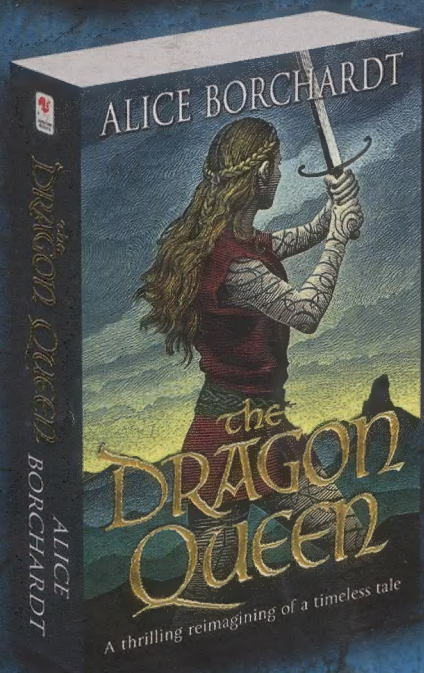
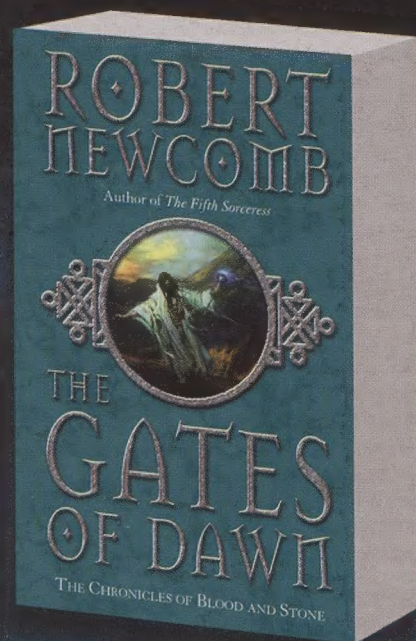
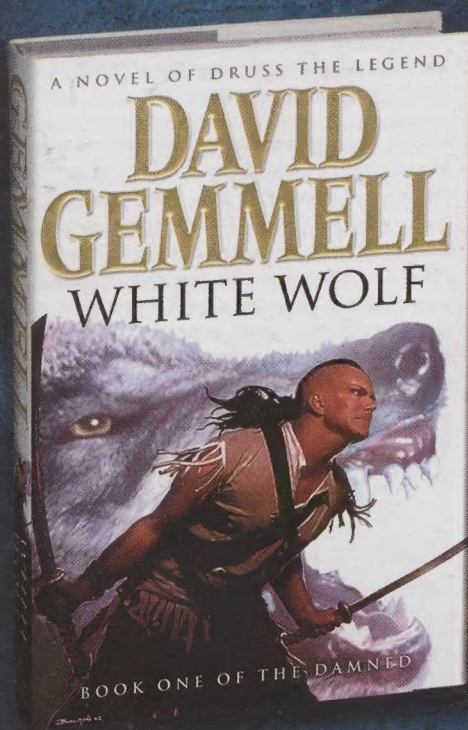
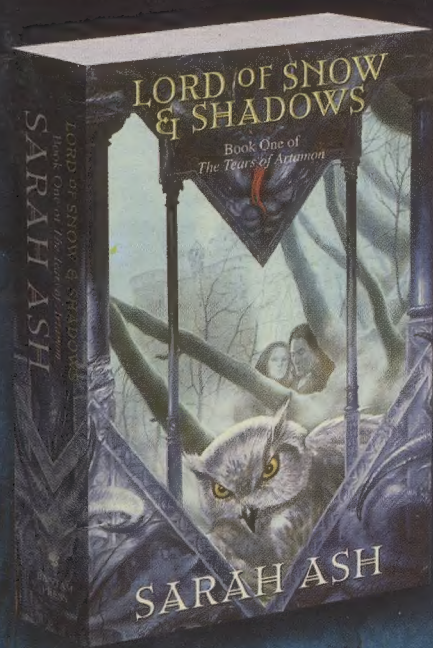
Williams, Tad. **The War of the Flowers**. DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0135-6, xiii+686pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a typically large new Williams opus, described by the publishers as "a new stand-alone contemporary [fantasy] novel set in Northern California – and also in the strange parallel world that coexists in the farthest reaches of the imagination.") May 2003.

Williams, Tad. **The War of the Flowers**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-127-6, xiii+686pp, hardcover, cover by Larry Rostant, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition – apparently simultaneous with the US edition [see above].) 1st May 2003.

Williams, Walter Jon. **The Praxis**. "Book One of Dread Empire's Fall." Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-2897-8, 418pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2002; Williams's return to sf after some years away, it's a large-scale space opera; reviewed by Nigel Brown in *Interzone* 185.) 2nd June 2003.



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